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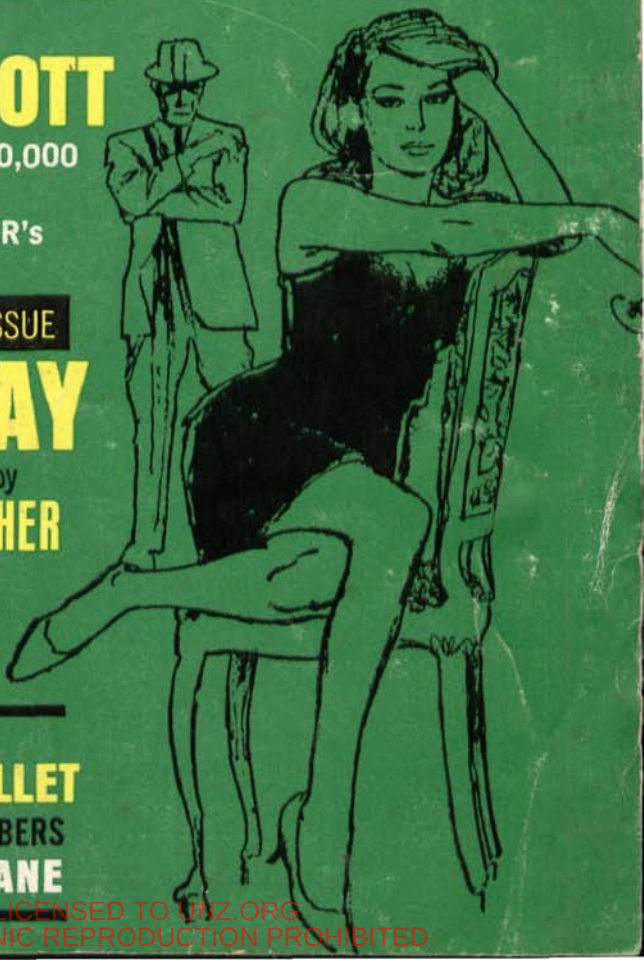

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SHELL SCOTT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1966 Vol. 2, No. 1

NEW COMPLETE SHELL SCOTT NOVEL

GUN PLAY

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

Out in the Hollywood night, a man lay dead, and a girl with a past was worried plenty about her future. Why? Shell Scott was to find out many things in that bullet-torn night, when a dying Hollywood king came up with a sheaf of papers—each one of which was both an open invite to blackmail—and a one-way ticket to Murder . . . .

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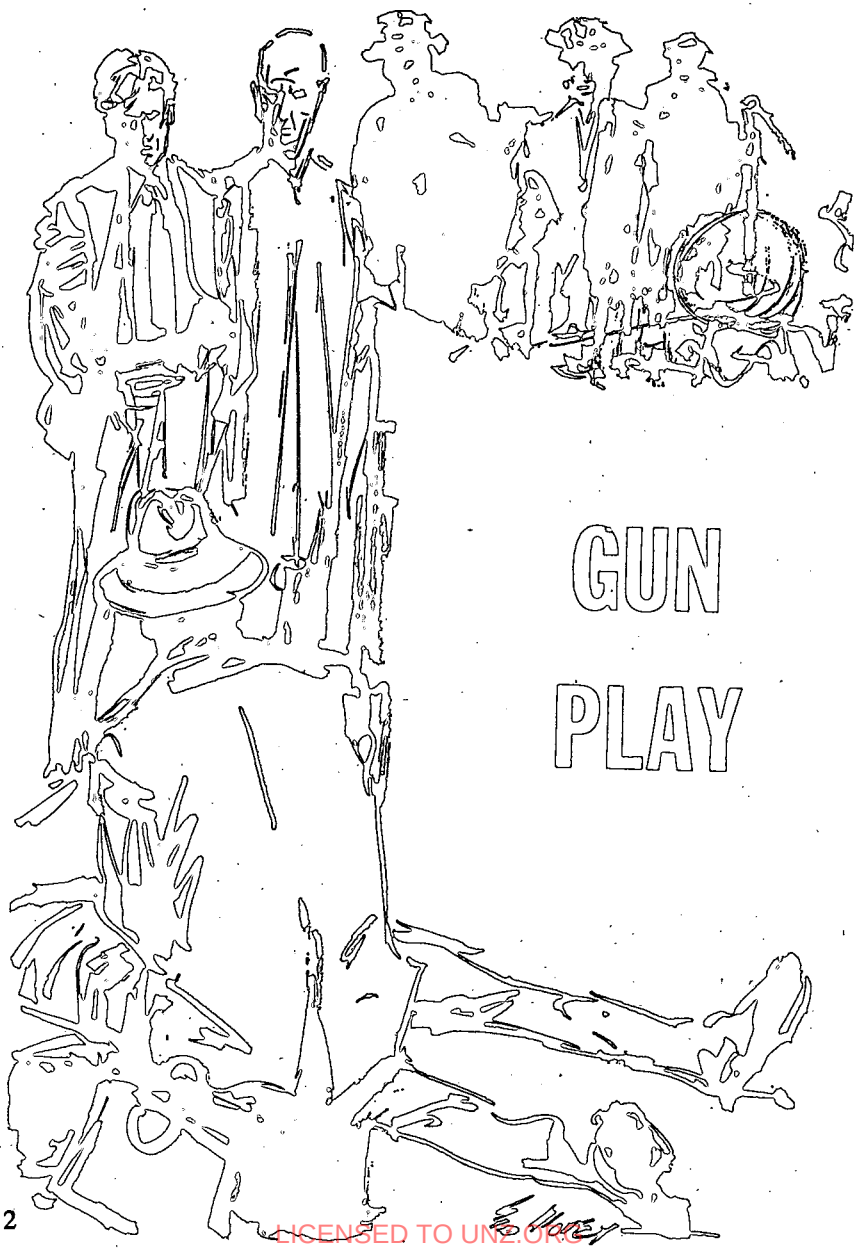

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A NEW COMPLETE SHELL SCOTT NOVEL

Men were his pawns, women his slaves. In one evil little bundle of papers, Hollywood's dying king had scrawled for Scott his last masterpiece—a one-way ticket to murder.

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

DENOSIA HAD nothing to do with it.

At least, not directly. But if it hadn't been for Denosia, it wouldn't have happened the way it did. In fact, it might not have happened at all.

Because—except for its undeniably adverse effect on the people who got killed or died suddenly—it worked out very well for many others. And splendidly for me, Shell Scott.

Even though, at first, I thought I might die too.

Of Denosia.

I'm a private investigator, the Shell of *Sheldon Scott, Investigations* in downtown Los Angeles, and I had just left Hollywood's Spartan Apartment Hotel—wherein are my three rooms and

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bath, tropical fish, naughty-enough nude of Amelia, books and stereo, and other items appropriate to the digs of a thirty-year-old bachelor—on my way to see a Mrs. Gladys Jellicoe.

It was a bright Wednesday morning in July and I was on my way to Beverly Hills again, starting another case. But clinging to the steering wheel, peering intently through the Cad's windshield.

More than once, early in a new case, I had found my head a shambles, due to the depressing circumstance that some clunk had attempted to depress it, clunking me upon it and endeavoring to cave it in from the outside. But this time was different. This time, even though the case had not yet begun, my head was a shambles, due to my endeavoring to cave it out from the inside.

It merely felt as if it might fall off any instant, and this, plus the probability that my bloodstream was still about thirty-proof, caused moments of mild concern which stole up on me unaware. All would be going along swimmingly; then there would arise inside my head a sort of ultrasonic and thus inaudible bubbling, which I was nonetheless able to detect with a very valuable seventh sense I possess. And which at the moment I would just as soon have done without.

What I *should* have done without was Denosia.

The catastrophe had commenced last night about eight, when I had picked up Denosia and we'd headed in my Cadillac convertible for a night on the town. Perhaps I should mention that this was the first time I had been with Denosia.

She was a good-looking woman. On the outside. Inside, it is my firm conviction that she was all fire and brimstone and black bats flying around. From bar to bar we went, gay, giddy. Lots of fun. Big dinner. Wine—the works.

Then, two o'clock. Time to go home. My apartment? All rightie. So, to my apartment. Ah-ha! Only something would always go wrongie. She would go to the johnnie. Or want me to mix another drinkie. Or mix one herself. Denosia was full of sly stratagems.

Then, finally, "Let's go to *my* apartment. I just don't feel rightie here."

So out we went, into the sunlight. Yeah, sunlight. So what then? She'd wanted to drive around a little. So, after leading me around, and on, and everywhere but astray, until the sun was cooking the blood in my eyes, when I had parked at the curb, near her mother's house—wouldn't you know?—she had pecked me on the cheek, popped out of the Cad, zipped forty-two yards to her door—I counted them when I went over there and banged on it—paused, turned,

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waved, and cried: "I had a *lovely* time!"

Then she was entirely out of sight. But not entirely out of mind.

And, thus, here I was, reeling down the Freeway, thinking: so who needs it? And thinking: What the hell am I doing here on the Freeway? And thinking that I hadn't made a big hit with Denosia. And that I hadn't make a big hit with her mother, either. Probably it just wasn't my day.

By the time I'd clattered up the stairs in the Spartan Apartment Hotel and found my apartment, it was eight-thirty Wednesday morning. I would have been late getting to work, if I'd had the slightest intention of going to work.

So I stripped, showered, pulled down the covers and looked at my big springy bed. Bed, I thought. Good old bed. Denosia could have come up and yanked on my shirttails without swerving me from—the phone rang.

Ordinarily I hold my liquor well, but I must have lost my hold on it. Because I answered the phone. Something interesting was beginning to go on in my head, sort of a squeaky fermenting, and I found myself saying, "But of course, my good woman," and things like that. "No, I haven't been to bed yet, but I don't need much sleep when I'm awake. No, only when I'm sleeping." And, "In a trice, madam, the instant I put my pants on."

I have a sporty blue outfit, for daytime wear, of which I'm enamored—pale blue trousers and darker blue coat with silver buttons—and with which I wear my dandy white Italian-made shoes. So I grabbed a shirt from a hanger and dressed in my sporty outfit—I thought. But it must be remembered that I was looking at colors through blood, not recognizing my chartreuse lounging-around-the-apartment slacks when I saw them.

Then, complete with clamshell holster and snub-nosed .38 Colt Special, plus a pair of dark wrap-around ski-type glasses to protect the sore veins in my eyeballs, I was off and away.

2

MRS. JELLICOE was still on the springy side of forty, a good-looking woman with a fine figure, but she had a wintry face and empty eyes.

We were sitting under a gruesomely striped umbrella in what she called "The Garden," which consisted of about twenty square yards of green Korean grass, bordered on one side by three hibiscus bushes and eight despairing peonies.

"I can't understand it," she said. "He never misses the Sunday afternoon with the kids." She sniffed irritation through her nose. "Doesn't give a farthing about see-

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ing *me*, of course. But he *always* spends some time playing with the kids."

"When was the last time you saw Mr. Jellicoe?" I asked.

"The *ex*-Mr. Jellicoe," she said, sniffing again.

That gave me another clue to how her mind worked. *She* was Mrs. Jellicoe—at least that was still her name, even though she and her ex had been divorced for nearly a year; but Thomas Jellicoe had now become ex-everything, unnameable and possibly invisible.

As a matter of fact, he *was* invisible, at least temporarily. That was why she'd called me. Mrs. Gladys Jellicoe wanted an efficient private investigator to dart about the Los Angeles landscape and come up with her ex-husband. But she hadn't actually hired me yet. What she had done was pour a fragile pink cup full of Orange Pekoe tea for each of us.

Mine was getting cool. I'm not exactly wild about Orange Pekoe tea. As a matter of fact, I wasn't exactly wild about Mrs. Jellicoe.

"I saw him Sunday, a month ago," she said. "That was the last time."

This was Wednesday, the sixth, a July morning already hot at ten. Last Sunday had been the third, so she'd not seen Thomas Jellicoe since June fifth.

"He hasn't been in touch with you since then?" I asked. "Hasn't been out to see the children, or even phoned?"

"Oh, that's perfectly normal. He's only allowed to come out once a month. The first Sunday of each month."

"Allowed? Is he a prisoner somewhere?"

"Goodness no. That's what the court ruled he must do. He brings my money the first Sunday each month, my three thousand dollars. The money awarded me by the court. For mental cruelty and all that."

"Ah." I smiled. "The alimony."

"Yes." She sniffed. "The money he *owes* me."

"That's why you're so worried about him, huh?"

She rolled that around behind her empty eyes for a while, and finally said, "You see, he *has* to bring me my money every first Sunday, but when he was here last month he didn't have it. He tried to tell me he'd had some unusual expenses, but I wouldn't listen to that."

I'll bet not, I thought.

"But he promised he'd bring both checks, the entire six thousand dollars, this time. He pleaded with me, and finally I told him all right."

"Good for you."

"That's why I know something must have happened to him. He wouldn't try to cheat me on purpose. He knows if he refused to

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satisfy his legal obligations I could put him in *jail.*"

"Yeah. You wouldn't do a thing like that, though, would you?"

Her eyes narrowed, glittered. "Of course not."

"Maybe you didn't think of it, but if he got tossed in the clink he couldn't make *any* money, not even the three thousand dollars to satisfy his legal obligations."

"I thought of it."

"Is Mr. Jellicoe required to come out here and deliver the loot personally? If he can mail it without getting ten years, maybe your six G's is accidentally on its way to the dead-letter office—"

"Oh, no. He could mail it, but he never does. He wouldn't miss a chance to see the children. Take my word for it, Mr. Scott, he would have been here in person Sunday unless something very unusual prevented it. And there hasn't been anything in the mail. Something must have happened to him. You've got to find him, Mr. Scott."

"Okay. I'll do my best for you. I'll even check with the dead-letter office—"

"Mr. Scott." She squinted some more. "I hope you're not implying that I'm interested only in the money. I'm naturally concerned about *him.* But—" She looped one arm behind the back of her chair and looked up at the gruesome umbrella.

"In all honesty," she continued,

"the money *is* important. I need it desperately." She lowered her gaze to me. "For the children."

"Yeah, I suppose all kids should have an allowance," I said.

At that moment, as if they'd heard the word, around the corner of the house came two small, screaming monsters. There was a boy about six years old, and a girl maybe a year older. She was chasing the boy, and they were both making more noise than was immediately believable.

About ten yards away the boy stopped. The girl stopped, too, and screamed at him. She wasn't talking. No words. Just screaming. He picked up a stick and hit her on the skull with it.

She let out a screech the like of which no living human could ever have heard before. It was a hor-

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rible sound, and naturally the boy started crying.

My entire attention had been fixed on the commotion, absolutely riveted upon it, but Mrs. Jellicoe was sipping her Orange Pekoe tea.

Pretty quick, though, she turned her head and said, "Shut up!"

The boy started hacking at the girl with his stick. She kicked him well above the kneecaps. He fell down in a heap and rolled around, howling. Then he jumped up and chased after the fleeing girl and they disappeared around the corner of the house. A little later the sound was only a thin keening. And bubbling.

"Energetic youngsters, aren't they?" I said, pressing the heel of one hand against my head.

"They do have a lot of fun playing together," she said.

"That's what it was, huh?" I stood up. "Well, I'll get busy." I paused. "That is, if I'm hired."

Silence.

"If I'm hired," I said again, gently.

Silence. She looked at me curiously.

"Well, am I hired?" I said.

I was getting curious myself.

"I don't know," she said. "I just—don't know."

She was looking me up and down, with an apprehensive expression congealing on her kisser. It didn't surprise me.

Leaving the house and heading here, I'd caught sight of myself in a full-length mirror, whereupon Mrs. Jellicoe, hearing my gasp, had said, "What's the matter?" I had come right out and lied, and said, "Nothing's the matter."

Something was the matter, all right. Except I didn't have on my sporty pale-blue pants. I had on my jazzy chartreuse pants. And somehow I'd grabbed a pink shirt which I wear with a suitably colored—but not pink—suit. It was clear to me what had happened: my eyes had filtered out the pink and I'd thought I was putting on a white shirt. And this one, well, it sort of clashed with the rest of my garb. Especially the pants. I like a little color in a man's apparel, but not even I like so much.

As though truly seeing me for the first time—in fact, as though truly seeing for the first time—she let her eyes focus on the cloud-white shoes on my big feet, which account for a substantial amount of my two hundred and six pounds, which is another way of saying that they are not entirely insignificant. Then she lifted her gaze up along my dazzling chartreuse trousers and over the splendid dark blue sports jacket with its silver buttons, and let them rest for some time, unmoving, unblinking, upon the rhapsodic yellow-and-purple tie on my pink shirt.

With her eyeballs thus rested, she exercised them on my face: the delicately broken nose; the ear

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with the little flat spot on top, where a minute piece was shot off; the unobtrusive scar over my right eye; the gray eyes themselves, and the brows above them—peaked like broken bows and almost artificially white against the bour-bor-bottle-tan of my somewhat battered chops.

And, finally, at the end of her six-foot-two glance, she intently observed the inch-long white hair, thickly massed and stiffly erect upon my scalp, hair only remotely resembling a wig made from a blond welcome mat.

"I just don't know," she said again.

"Well," I said, "I guess that makes two of us. I don't know, either."

She smiled. It was not so much like a lady lifting her lip, but more as if her upper teeth fell down. "I merely—You certainly don't look like the last detective I employed."

"It's eight to five I don't look like the last detective anybody employed. Who was the other guy?"

"The detective?"

I nodded.

She told me his name. I knew the bum. He was a short thin cat who smelled of stale sweat and had virtually bald eyelids from catching his lashes in keyholes. Divorce cases, often based on photographic "evidence," were his specialty. Sometimes, partly to save on expenses, he got into the pictures himself.

"Lady," I said, my patience wearing thin, or at least getting less thick, "I have absolutely nothing to do, but I am nonetheless anxious to get started."

She sighed. "All right. Let me give you my unlisted number. And his address." She had them already written on a paper which she handed me. "Do inform me the instant you learn anything, Mr. Scott."

"Right."

That about did it. For a slightly puny start.

When I'd first arrived, after telling me only that she'd been unable to contact her ex-husband, Mrs. Jellicoe gave me a four-by-five photograph of Thomas and answered the basic questions I asked about him. They'd been married nine years, divorced a year ago. She didn't know what kind of job he had now, if any, but during their marriage he'd been an aide or assistant to a man named Gideon Cheim. I knew who Cheim was—all Hollywood knew, or knew about, Gideon Cheim.

He was one of the old-timers of the movie industry, a man about seventy years old now, and no longer active in the business. A couple of years back he'd been maneuvered out of his position as production head of the big, sprawling Premiere Studios in Cul-

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ver City. Since then little had been heard of him, but before that time Cheim had been one of the most powerful—and feared—men in Hollywood. Maybe *the* most. Recently I'd read that he'd entered a hospital for an operation of some kind, the once-supercharged machine running down now, I supposed.

In his prime, he'd always had half a dozen assistants around him. Yes-men, or court jesters. Mrs. Jellicoe didn't really know what her husband's duties or functions had been. Just "whatever Mr. Cheim wanted him to do, I suppose."

She never saw him or heard from him except on that vital, never-to-be-missed "first Sunday" of every month. She had no idea what could have happened to Mr. Jellicoe, if anything. She knew of no plans he might have had for a trip, personal enemies, aches or illnesses.

I got the impression that, in her thoughts, Thomas was less the ex than the late Mr. Jellicoe, no more than a dim and slightly distasteful memory.

Except once a month.

"Oh," she said suddenly. "How much do you charge? What's your fee?"

"Hundred a day."

"A hundred dollars? A day?"

"Uh-huh."

"But isn't that horribly expensive?"

I smiled, but didn't answer. It was exactly the amount she was charging Thomas Jellicoe.

After a moment she sniffed. "Well, all right. But I hope this doesn't take long."

"It might take no more than an hour and some phone calls." I paused, looking at her keenly, considering my first clue in the case.

"On the other hand, I may never find him."

She fluttered her hands in momentary anguish. Then she looked around and said, apropos of absolutely nothing, "You didn't drink your tea."

"By golly, I didn't," I managed weakly.

She looked ready to grab it and hand it to me. I looked around myself, hunting for something I could seize upon for a change of subject.

"Some, ah—Some garden," I said.

It wasn't quite what I'd been hunting for, but at least she forgot the tea.

"Oh, it's nice, she said. "I enjoy it. But somehow, I don't know why, I just can't get flowers to grow for me."

It was odd. I had been bugged more than a little by this gal; something invisible came out of her and growled at me. But for a moment all that melted away, and I merely felt sorry, very sorry, for Mrs. Jellicoe.

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3

THOMAS JELLICOE lived, or at least had lived—it was a bit early to form any opinion about that yet—in a three-room suite on the fourth floor of the Cavendish House. The hotel detective, a man named Horter, unlocked the door and stepped inside after me.

Before coming here I'd made the usual calls and put some lines out. After getting no answer to my ring when I phoned the suite—to make sure Jellicoe wasn't lolling in it while I tracked him through the L.A. streets—and learning from the desk that he hadn't picked up his key for four days, I'd called the L.A.P.D.

The police had nothing on him; Jellicoe wasn't in jail or morgue. I had Hazel, the cute little gal on the switchboard in the Hamilton Building—at the end of the hall outside my office—checking local hospitals for me.

I still didn't know any more about the man than I had an hour ago, but ever since I'd heard the name, "Jellicoe," this morning I'd been trying to remember where I'd heard it before. I knew I had somewhere but I'd been unable to pin it down.

I stood in the suite's living room, looking around and hoping something would jog my memory, while Horter walked to a closed door in the far wall and opened it carefully.

"Wheeoo!," he said. "Lookit this!"

I went over and stood next to him in what was obviously a bedroom that looked as if gale force winds had hit it. The spread and sheets were half off the bed, both pillows were on the floor, the mattress was askew.

The top three drawers of a four-drawer bureau were open and dress shirts, sports shirts, handkerchiefs, and miscellaneous doodads were scattered on the burnt-orange carpet.

A closet door was open and I could see suits and slacks hanging inside, in mild disarray, with a few items crumpled on the carpet beneath them.

"Somebody sure tossed the place," I said.

"And in a hurry."

He bent down and looked under the bed. I walked to the bureau and opened the bottom drawer. It was filled with shorts and socks in neat piles; plus three bright Ascots—one gold, one red, and one white. A leather bag filled with cuff links was in the left front corner.

The drawer above was empty except for a pair of swim trunks and three clean but crumpled T-shirts. Something small and red caught my eye, and I picked it up. The thing looked like a little pebble about twice the size of a pinhead. One side of it was smooth, curved and shiny, the other jagged

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as if it had been broken from a larger piece.

The bathroom, like everything but the bedroom, was in order, apparently untouched. In the medicine cabinet were tools for shaving, a can of spray-on deodorant—alleged to make a man more sweet, confident, irresistible, and virile—and a mouthwash equally as rejuvenating, a bottle of aspirin, a plastic prescription vial half filled with amphetamine capsules, and a box of tranquilizers.

In Jellicoe's closet, along with a couple of brown sport coats and matching slacks, hanging from shaped wooden hangers were seven suits, well-made and freshly pressed but none very jazzy in color. All the garments were conservatively cut. Nothing very exciting yet—but those three Ascots hinted at a dash of daring, or at least Walter Mitty, somewhere in the missing Thomas.

I said to Horter, "Last time Jellicoe was around was Saturday night, huh? He left late and hasn't been back?"

"Far as I know," he said glumly. This budding mystery might definitely disturb the even tenor of his days.

"What kind of a guy was he?" I smiled slightly and corrected myself. "I mean, is he." No reason to think of him as dead yet.

"Nice enough. Quiet, sort of retiring. Forty years old, I guess. A little under six feet, thin." He squinted. "Hard to remember anything about him. Didn't make much of an impression on me, I guess." Horter paused, then added, "Not the kind of guy to make much of a fuss."

"I didn't think he would be. I've met his wife—and she divorced *him*. Look, if he really hasn't been in the hotel since Saturday night—and, presumably, the room's been looking like this since around then—how come the maid didn't walk in and let out a yelp?"

"Last week the guy requested no maid service. No nothing, didn't want anything till further notice."

"He say why?"

"No, just he didn't want to be disturbed. Temporarily."

I looked around. "Maybe he had something in here he didn't want the maid to know about."

Horter shrugged.

"Can you find out just when it was last week he made the request?"

"Is it important?"

"I don't know yet."

He used the room phone and called the desk, then hung up and said. "Monday, it was. Monday last week."

"How long has Jellicoe been staying here at the Cavendish?"

"I guess about a year. Well, I better go tell the manager what the hell."

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"I'll look around a little more. Okay?"

"Sure," Horter said. He went out.

In the next ten minutes I looked at or into everything visible in the suite, then walked back to the bed carrying three photographs and a checkbook, sat down and lit a cigarette, thinking.

After talking to Mrs. Jellcoe I had about half decided her ex-hubby had simply gotten tired of handing over three G's to Gladys every month, and skipped; or perhaps the ulcer, which it could be presumed he possessed, had begun bleeding. But guys do not toss their own apartments, at least not when in their right minds, and this one had been thoroughly tossed.

All of the photographs were interesting, and one of them was something of a shock to me, but the checkbook was the thing that finally jarred loose some memory about Jellicoe. The checks were printed with the address and full name of Mr. Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe, and the top check of those remaining in the book was numbered 258. The first entry in the record pages was for a check drawn January 1 of this year in the amount of $3000, payable to Gladys Jellicoe. January 1 had been a Saturday. Lovely way, I thought to start out the happy New Year.

Similar checks had been drawn in February, March, April, and May, but there'd been none for Gladys during June or July. Perhaps not surprisingly. On the first Sunday in June Jellicoe's checking account balance was $844.58. All other checks during the year had been for less than $3,000 except one. The last one.

Number 257 was a check for $40,000, payable to "Lawson & Farrar, Inc." and dated July 1, this past Friday, when Jellicoe's balance would have been under a thousand bucks—except that on the same day he'd made a substantial deposit of $55,000. Minus the $40,000 represented by check 257, the balance shown was nearly $16,000, then and now. Because there'd been no deposits or withdrawals since then.

I didn't have any idea what the unprecedentedly large July 1 deposit and check meant, but the name Lawson & Farrar, Inc., rang a bell and I recalled where I'd heard of Jellicoe.

About a year back a Thomas Jellicoe had been arrested and charged with felony hit-and-run. He'd been mugged, booked, and caged, then sprung by the law firm of Lawson & Farrar, who had conducted the defense when the case was brought to trial. Jellicoe was acquitted. But not, I felt sure, at bargain-basement prices.

It left unanswered the several questions which automatically came to mind, and turned to some-

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thing perhaps even more puzzling, and certainly a lot more fun—the photos I'd found here.

Two of the three were glossy eight-by-ten studio stills, the standard shots given out by actors and actresses and publicity departments, but they were both of sparkling-eyed, tres effervescent, swinging Sylvia Ardent, about whom very little was standard, since very little of Sylvia was very little, for she was a big girl now.

Sylvia, or Miss Ardent, or the ardent Miss Ardent, as she was variously spoken of, or referred to in the trade, was merely the succulent and super-shapely star of TV's currently-number-four series, "Girl's Dorm," which had a Nielson rating nearly equal to her best measurement.

I had heard her referred to as everything from "the gal with too much too-much" to "the queen of the booby tube," and at least half the men in the country must at one time or another have thought thoughts for which, were telepathy commonplace, they would in certain stuffy circles have been ostracized, if not actually incarcerated.

Me, I would have been electrocuted. I'd watched "Girl's Dorm" more than once, and the sight of Sylvia—I thought of her as Sylvia—in a pink Baby Doll swatting another "coed" with a feather pillow was not a hard pillow to swallow. Clearly Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe shared my, and half the nation's, censorable sentiments.

The photos were not new, but appeared to have been aged by more than time, as though held often in hot fingers, perhaps packed and unpacked, gazed upon, dreamed upon, maybe even sat upon, often and long. But what cracked me up was the fact, that, clearly, Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe had shared even more than my censorable sentiments.

The first picture was a closeup, a head-and-shoulders shot of Sylvia laughing like a gal getting tickled by a feather boa just out of camera range, her big eyes open wide as she stared at a hilarious happening off to her left somewhere. In the second picture she was reclining on a white bear rug, clad in a pale gray negligee which concealed her justly-celebrated voluptuousness about the way smog hides the Hollywood Hills on weekends, and she was looking, with unconcealed lust in her eyes at something exceedingly desirable off to her right somewhere.

Sylvia was also in the third picture, but it was a nightclub photo from the Panther Club—the kind pretty gals with long legs take for a buck and as many dollars as you feel like tipping them. Luscious Miss Ardent was wearing a black cocktail dress cut so low in front

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that I assumed the V was not decolletage but a rip, and she was gazing dreamily across the table at —Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe.

Jellicoe, dressed with the sparkle and dash of an undertaker at his best friend's funeral, but grinning into the popping flashbulb like an idiot with four sets of teeth.

Cigarettes smouldered in a tray before them. In the table's center rested a wavy-bottomed man-eating-clamshell big enough for a whole clam family, with only about a quart of the invitation to AA left in the shell's bottom; and extending outward from the liquor and hunks of pineapple and wilting flowers were two long straws, one held lightly in Sylvia's fingers and the other pointing toward Jellicoe's rapacious teeth.

From my coat pocket I pulled the four-by-five photo Mrs. Jellicoe had given me, and scrutinized it again. Although he was again dressed in black, as in the picture with Sylvia, the shot was barely recognizable as of the same man. This was a somber, sorrowful face, drawn and drained. All the lines slanted downward, from the corners of his eyes, from his nose, at the edges of his mouth. He looked like a man going down for the third time in despair.

But obviously he hadn't hit bottom. In the latest picture he looked like his happy younger twin. I was reasonably certain it

was not only the latest picture but a very recent one, because on the bottom of the cardboard frame in which the picture was mounted somebody, presumably Jellicoe, had written the date: July 1. Following the date was a bold, forcefully drawn exclamation point. A little too much, I thought.

I had a friend at Jellicoe's bank, and phoned him. Thomas Jellicoe also had a savings account at the bank, but there was only a couple of thousand dollars in it. He had indeed made a $55,000 deposit on Friday, July 1, but the striking fact about the deposit was that he'd made it in cash, five hundred and fifty hundred-dollar bills. Since then Jellicoe's $40,000

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check of the same date had reached the bank, endorsed by Norman Lawson for deposit to the firm's account.

Well, I thought, I had some intriguing bits of information, not one of which meant a thing to me. But I knew the offices of Lawson & Farrar were on the very top floor of the Abel Tower on Wilshire Boulevard.

So I put everything back where I'd found it and headed for the top.

4

THE SECRETARY in the small outer office was not young and not pretty. She typed with the staccato rhythm of a woodpecker drilling a dead tree. She also served as receptionist, and after I gave her my name she went through a door bearing the name "Lawson" in raised gold letters.

After ten seconds came out and said, "You may go in, Mr. Scott."

The office was larger than most living rooms, and the pure white carpet looked like fifty bucks a yard, and felt like it to my feet. The walls were tinted a faint rosy-orange and cinnamon-colored draperies covered the far wall, beyond which was undoubtedly one of the most striking views in Los Angeles.

Norman Lawson presented a pretty striking view himself.

I'd seen his name in the news on several occasions but we'd never met. He was a big man. An inch or so taller than I, he had shoulders on him that weighed more than some people, and there were no padding in his coat. His coat was draped on a valet in the corner of his office. He sat behind an unpainted brushed-steel desk wearing a white dress shirt open at the throat and with the cuffs rolled up over thick, brown, hairy wrists. He looked as solid as the desk before him.

As I walked in, he looked up from some typed pages and said, "Mr. Scott?" Then he flicked sharp brown eyes over me and smiled. "Who else?"

"How do you do, Mr. Lawson? Thanks for letting me bust in without an appointment." I stopped in front of the desk and shook his extended hand, then sat down in a comfortable chair—one big enough, for a change—upholstered in nubby linen the same shade as the drapes.

"Think nothing of it," he said. "I've been on this brief for two hours already. Time for a break." He flashed me a quick grin and added, "Besides, I wanted to meet you. Frankly, I've been hoping to learn the secret of your success."

"Well, I suppose there have been a few unusual cases I got tangled up in, but—"

"I meant with women."

I laughed, but the sound was lost in the bass roar of his own

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laughter as he threw back his head and let thunder boom out. For another minute or two we jawed about miscellaneous unimportances, but I didn't tell him the secret. If there is any, I don't have it. Ask Denosia. And if I had it, I'd keep it. Even if I didn't keep it, I sure wouldn't give any of it to a guy who looked like Norman Lawson.

Then he said, "What did you want to see me about, Shell?" It was Shell and Norm by this time.

"Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe," I said.

He nodded slightly, looking at me. Waiting for the rest of it. Which, of course, was a completely normal reaction.

I suppose I'm a suspicious s.o.b. If so, it's because I learned the hard way. But I had formed an assumption or two this morning and had proceeded to conclusions based upon them.

In the back of my mind—and it should be noted that, coming way up into the sky in the express elevator, my head had begun silently bubbling once more—I was well aware that Thomas Jellicoe might be in some special kind of sick bay, slowly and tremulously recovering from near-lethal overdosages of that clam-and-pineapple soup or whatever he and Sylvia had been inhaling last Friday night.

Or, even, perish the thought, if he and Sylvia had later been drunkenly uninhibited, which was unthinkable, though only slightly more unthinkable than the thought of a toothy Jellicoe doing the town with bosomy Sylvia. In which case he might still be recovering from that; or he might even have died entirely of too-rapid disinhibition. Which, of course, if you can't stay, is of course the most desirable way to go: with your boots off.

In the front of my mind, however, was a half-congealed conviction based on one fearsome fact: That, had it been humanly possible, Jellicoe would without fail have called upon the fearsome fact, Gladys Jellicoe, this Sunday past.

Yet he had failed to do so.

Consequently it had not been humanly possible.

Therefore, Jellicoe was either kidnaped, amnesic, jailed, hospitalized, lost, or dead.

Thus—ignoring several dozen other possibilities—if he *were* dead, and hadn't died a natural death, or committed suicide, somebody had killed him.

I kept thinking about Sylvia. It was fun thinking about Sylvia.

Jellicoe had been with her Friday night. So far at least, nobody I'd contacted had seen him since late Saturday night. Maybe he'd been with Sylvia again. That would be enough to kill almost anybody. Especially a thin, weak-looking guy like Jellicoe.

As soon as I finished here, I

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was sure going to have to call on Sylvia Ardent. And the sooner the better. If she *had* killed old Jellicoe, though, it was going to be a damned difficult thing to prove. Women are tricky—if I hadn't already learned that when little more than a growing boy, I would have figured it out this morning—and Sylvia was a hell of a woman.

It was beginning to dawn on me that maybe I was wandering far afield here, when, after what might have been an unusually lengthy pause, Lawson said, "What about Tom?"

"Tom?" I said. "Oh, yeah. Do you know where he is?"

Lawson shook his head. "Not at the moment. I haven't seen him since last week."

"You did see him last week, though?"

"Yes, on Friday. It was a business matter." He looked at me for a moment and then said, "Tom in some kind of trouble?"

"Why would he be in trouble?"

He smiled. "Why else would a detective be asking me about him?"

"Good point. I must remember you're an attorney. Well, maybe he is in trouble. Maybe. I don't know. But as far as I've been able to determine, he hasn't been seen for several days. I just visited his suite in the Cavendish House and the place was torn up. It had been searched rather sloppily. And Jellicoe hasn't been there himself since Saturday night." I paused. "I'm merely trying to find him, Norm—or find out what's happened to him, if anything. If you know anything that might clear up the mystery I'd very much like to hear about it."

He looked down at the top of his desk for several seconds, teeth pressed into his lip. Then he leaned back and looped a leg over one of the chair arms. "Nothing privileged about this," he said slowly, "and it might be important. There's a possibility Tom got his hands on a lot of money. I've no idea how much, or how he did, but, it wouldn't have been chicken feed. The business matter I mentioned was the payment of a fee he owed me. But it wasn't chicken feed, either. Not forty thousand dollars."

"That's how much he gave you?"

"Yes. Personal check. I happened to know he'd been more than ordinarily short of money only a few days earlier, so I cleared the check right away. It was good." Lawson leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk top. "What I'm getting at is this: if he came up with forty thousand, for all I know he had twice that, maybe three or four times that much. And if he had it in his room—well, you say the suite was searched."

I nodded. "The logic's all right. I just don't think that's the an-

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swer. Would you mind telling me what the fee was for?"

"It was in the papers. I defended him in Superior Court before Judge Patrick. Felony hit-and-run. You probably read about it."

I nodded.

"My fee was fifty thousand. He gave me ten, but I had to wait for the balance. He kept putting me off, one excuse after another. I figured all I'd ever get out of him was excuses—look, I don't mean to knock him down, Shell. Tom's a sweet, shy, introverted loser, but I like him. And usually I don't warm to the type. But it's the truth, I'd decided I'd get more hot air, but no cold cash. Then, in he walks last Friday with a big fat check, looking like he'd had his face and spirits lifted. Something got into him."

"Maybe he was looking forward to a date with Sylvia Ardent that night."

"Sylvia Ardent? TV?"

"The same."

"That would be the day." He grinned. "That would be the living day."

"I wasn't making a joke. He was out boozing with her last Friday night."

Lawson held his head motionless. "You're kidding."

"Straight goods."

"Tom?"

"Tom Jellicoe."

Surprise showed in every line of his face and in the widened eyes and elevated brows. I would love, I thought, to play poker with a guy who did things like that with his face.

"Well!" he said.

"Something else," I said. "I've checked around a little by phone, but haven't been able to find out what kind of job Jellicoe has now. I'd hate to think he's sitting at a desk somewhere. I understand he used to do some work for Gideon Cheim—"

"Still does. The old boy's right-hand man. Has been for many years."

"That's good news. If anybody can tell me where Jellicoe is, it ought to be Mr. Cheim. Didn't he check into the hospital a while back?"

"Right, a week or so ago. His ticker was coming apart. Had an open-heart operation, and the docs put it back together."

"I'd like to talk to him. How'd the operation come out?"

"Damn near killed the old boy, but he made it, I hear he's in good shape now. Man like that's tough to kill."

"You know what hospital he's in?"

He thought a moment. "Some private hospital. Don't remember the name."

"Well, there's just one other thing. You can kick me out if you want to, Norm, but this might be important—especially if Cheim doesn't have any better idea where

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Jellicoe is than the rest of us do."

"Shoot."

"I don't know much about this hit-and-run Jellicoe was involved in, except that he was alleged to have hit a pedestrian and killed him. But even though he was acquitted, some of the victim's surviving relatives might have thought him guilty, and built up a big hate. Conceivably, even a murderous burn. You know how it is."

He nodded. "Sure I do. But forget it. The victim was just a transient, no job, a bum passing though. We weren't about to turn up a single blood-relation."

"Uh-huh." I thought a minute. It had been a grab in the dark, anyhow. Finally I said, "Well, here's the rest of it. Was Jellicoe guilty?"

Lawson scowled. "You know I can't—"

"Hold it a shake. I'm trying to find the guy. If he's in trouble, I'm going to do my damndest to get him out of it. And I'm going to ask any question, of anybody, that I think might help. Even if it's a longshot." I paused. "I'm going to ask, but that doesn't mean I'll always get answers. This one, though, I'd like."

I didn't expect him to tell me, but I had nothing to lose by asking. After all, Jellicoe himself must have asked Sylvia Ardent a question. At least one. And look what had happened. I wondered where she was. I wondered what I ought to ask her.

Maybe I should go put on a black suit. Or at least get rid of this pink shirt.

Norm Lawson had pushed away from the desk and walked over to the corner of his office, and was fiddling with the cord of the draperies. He didn't open them, just fiddled. After about a minute he came back and sat down again.

"You think it's important?"

"Hell, I don't really know. My job's a lot like yours, Norm. You rarely know what the big one is, what the turning point is, until you look back when the case is over. Sometimes not even then." I paused. "But it might be more important than anything else."

He scowled some more. Then he said, "I didn't really know myself, until after the verdict came in. Until well after the acquittal."

"I understand. So?"

"He was guilty as hell."

5

IT TOOK a little doing, but by one P.M. I had learned that Sylvia Ardent was not working on the set this day but was at home, and that her home was one of the six-room, fifteen-hundred-dollar-a-month "Teepees" on the grounds of the world-famous "Indian Ranch" only half a mile distant from the stretch of Sunset which

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extends from the Strip into Beverly Hills.

Each "Teepee" had an individual name—Iroquois, Mohawk, Apache, Sioux, and similar ughs—and in the main building were such dandies as the Sitting Bull Dining Room and Custer's Last Stand Bar. They were cute as a baby's scalp at Indian Ranch.

But that's where Sylvia was at one of this hot bright Wednesday, so that's where I was, too. There, and pushing on the black-iron arrowhead, which I presumed was a bell, and which I had managed to find in only two and a half minutes.

While waiting to see if anything would happen, I mentally rummaged through the bits of info I knew about Miss Ardent other than the fact of her starring role in the TV series.

I remembered reading she'd started out as a model, but I myself recalled with some vividness when she had come to the attention of citizens at large, or at least male citizens.

She had posed for an unprecedented six-page-sized foldout in *Whoopee!*, the Magazine for Manly Men, and it was almost as though one could hear the thunk-thunk-thunk of eyeballs jutting out of sockets from Miami to Seattle and New York City to San Diego. It wasn't even a nude, either—at least not a totally-nude nude.

Sylvia had been posed, or caught by the camera, beneath an apple tree in a shaded spot in real country-looking countryside, wearing a tight pair of faded blue jeans rolled up over her shapely calves, on tiptoe, reaching high above her head for an apple barely beyond her reach. She was facing the camera, tip of curled tongue caught between her teeth as though to aid her apparent concentration, a delicate pattern of light and shadow on her youthfully-blooming face and body, and a single strong shaft of sunlight falling full on one startling, and startlingly white, breast.

The comparison with "Eve" was inevitable, and was made time and time again, both in word and print, and undoubtedly in fevered imaginations. That shot sure stirred up the old Adam. Shortly afterwards she was in Hollywood

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and made two or three films. Then TV and the top of the heap.

I hadn't heard any buzzer buzz or bell ring inside the low L-shaped house, but suddenly the door opened.

There she was, the Baby-Doll babe of TV, Mammarian of the movies, star of "Girl's Dorm," possibly suspect and potential assassin, Sylvia Ardent, in the flesh. Well, not exactly flesh.

She wore a two-piece rayon-jersey suit—pale green, sleeveless slip-over "shell" blouse and darker green skirt—and high-heeled green pumps. She was everything Sylvia was on color television, only everything was better, including the color: creamy white skin, eyes the shade of emeralds, golden-red hair, lips you could spook a bull with.

She moistened those muleta-red lips and smiled sweetly. "Yes?"

"Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe." I said craftily.

Her mouth flopped open. Her eyes widened. She breathed deeply. Her heavy breasts rose and fell and swayed.

"What do—What do—" she said.

I looked around.

"What do—"

I figured there'd been quite enough of that and said, "Well, whatever you're getting at, we can't do it out here. Do you mind if we go inside?"

"I'd rather," she said.

She went back into her Teepee and I followed her, unconsciously—hell, consciously, because I had taken my dark glasses off in order to see better—noting the swoop and swing of her incurving waist and outcurving hips, but eventually I noticed the shaggy dark brown carpet, splashes of color on the walls, the low beamed ceiling, a rustic bar in one corner.

Sylvia walked to a massive dove-gray couch covered with fluffy bright pillows and sank down on it. I sat at its other end and looked at her. I was beginning to wonder what she'd been trying to say out there.

She stared at me and said, "You know?"

What could I say? It looked like she was about to confess, and I naturally didn't want to say the wrong thing. So I merely smiled. A smile is pretty noncommittal.

"You know about Friday?"

I smiled. "You mean the Panther Room? Him and you?"

"Yes. She sighed. "You really do know about it?"

Know *what* about it? I wondered. I didn't really have enough to go on yet. So finally I stopped smiling and asked her, *"What* about it?"

She sighed again. "All right."

"All right?" I said, puzzled. Something was amiss here. Her replies did not seem directed straight to the mark. It was as though she was answering somebody else's

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questions. Perhaps she had noises in her head, too.

Her voice had a little extra heat in it.

"I don't suppose you want any money from me either."

"Money? Of course not."

She was looking me over with some care now.

"What's your name?" she asked me.

"Shell. Shell Scott."

"Shell Scott. I'd like to at least know your name first."

She stood up and faced me, about three feet away, weight on her left foot and right leg relaxed, one hand on the outthrust ultra-femininity of that rounded hip, swelling breasts thrusting against the pale green blouse.

Then she said, "I didn't think Tommy would kiss and tell. I thought I knew how his mind worked. Men! I suppose you're just like him."

"I'm not a bit like him."

Sarcastically she said, "You mean you don't kiss and tell?"

"I don't do *anything* and tell."

She crossed her arms in front of her narrow waist, the movement gently squeezing those more-than-ample breasts, and took hold of the bottom of her blouse, right hand on its left side, left hand on the right.

"Well, he told *you,* didn't he?" she said.

I simply stared.

"I guess it's the curse I have to bear!" she cried. "Oh, men! Why can't they be something else?"

She was sure worked up about something.

"I should have stayed a call girl," she wailed. "It was more honest than *this!* Gideon! That's where it started. I should never have told him, the bum. I'd like to pull his eyes off. I hope he gets bankruptured. I'd like to drop his fat carcass in shark-infected waters!"

She kept saying Gideon. How many guys named Gideon could there be? Any more besides Gideon Cheim?

Sylvia stepped toward me, stopped inches away. I could feel the heat from her flesh, smell the delicate scent of feminine lotions and sprays and perfumes and oils.

"First Gideon. Then Tommy. Now you. Who'll be next?" She looked at me appraisingly for several electric seconds, then smiled oddly.

Her voice was just a bit less strident, more gentle, when she spoke. "You don't look like the type," she said. "No, you don't, Shell Scott. If we hadn't met like this, I might have gone for you like it was my own idea, instead of being extorted into it."

"Hold it," I said. "Wait a second."

"You some kind of nut?" she yelled.

I've mentioned that Sylvia was a big gal. She was also a strong

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one. She had healthy muscles. She had a lot of healthy things. A weaker man couldn't have handled her under the circumstances, because I was seated, somewhat awkwardly bent forward toward her, while she was standing and could get not only the thrust of her wrists but the whole shapely bulk of her firm, solid body plus the forces of gravity working against me. No, a weaker man couldn't have handled her; and I was a man getting weaker.

In my thirty years there had been thousands of hours and millions of minutes, but never had there been a minute or even a moment like this one. Not remotely like this one.

Here I was inches from one of the most gorgeous, most shapely, most sexy broads on the planet and I was fighting like a madman to keep her from being a bad girl.

What's coming off here? I wondered. Can this be me? Maybe I'm not really Shell Scott. He wouldn't be doing anything as dumb as this.

I spread my feet and braced myself, then leaned back and yanked. Pulled off balance, she fell against me, squirming. As I let go of her wrists and tried to reach around her she got an elbow free and smacked me in the eye with it. *That* hurt. But I managed to get my arms around hers and my hands clamped behind her back. I thought I had her then.

But Sylvia was not a woman easily subdued. She was a gal who didn't know the meaning of defeat.

She got a leg up and planted her foot against the side of the couch and shoved, trying to pull me back with her. She didn't manage that, but she did kick hard enough to send the couch sliding out from beneath me, and down both of us went. But that was just about the end of the struggle. I landed half on top of her, got her wrists in my hands again, squeezed, pulled, and waited.

Ten seconds, fifteen, then she relaxed suddenly.

"Okay," she said. "I know when I'm licked. You win. So what do we do now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Well, talk."

"You want to talk," she said slowly. She looked past me, up at the ceiling beams. Her arched brows furrowed. "What about?"

"Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe," I said.

We were right back where we'd started. Well, not exactly. But we'd come fool circle, so to speak.

"Just talk?"

"That's right."

She sighed. She squirmed slightly against me. Then she sighed again, and squirmed a bit again. And then she smiled that slow, wise, and infuriatingly self-satisfied smile which is inherent in every female, born in them, handed

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down from Eve through Lilith and Circe and all of eternity's sirens, to the woman of today and the tomato of tomorrow, the age-old smile of victorious surrender and triumph in defeat. Then Sylvia Ardent said softly, "The hell you don't want me."

"Well, by gum, I do," I said.

"What are we doing on the floor, then?"

"Well, *I'm* resting."

"Why do you want to talk about Tommy?"

"I'm a detective. And—"

"A detective? A policeman?"

"No, no. A private investigator. Just a citizen. I'm not going to arrest you or anything."

"Or anything?"

"I already told you."

"I know. I didn't believe you."

"I got the message. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Maybe once more." A hint of that previous smile. "Go on, Shell."

"Yeah. Well, I'm looking for Thomas Jellicoe. I don't suppose, when you were with him, that you killed him."

"Not quite," she said. "I think that's when he started living."

"You haven't heard from him since Friday night?"

"No. Should I have? That one night was the bargain. Of course, you can't really trust extorters, I suppose, can you?"

"Not very often." There was that extortion comment again. To be added to other interesting comments she'd made.

I took a deep breath, reminded her of several things she'd said, then asked her, "The Gideon was Gideon Cheim?"

"Yes."

"And Tommy! What did he have on you?"

She moistened her lips, let her head turn easily to one side. "I was a call girl once. A long time ago. I already mentioned it, when I thought you knew. Until Friday, I didn't think anybody knew about it here in Hollywood except Gideon. I worked for him, for his production company, when I made my three pictures. Those two bombs, then the big one, the good one. That's when it started—the good *and* the bad."

"Uh-huh. And Tommy?"

"He knew, so Gideon must have told him. Tommy's his right-hand arm, you know."

"Yeah."

"Gideon must have told Tommy about my being a call girl once. She pressed her lips together. "It was only for about six months, years and years ago. I'm not proud of it, but I'm not ashamed of it, either. Not really. I was young and hungry and broke. And I'm pretty dumb, anyway."

"You could have fooled me."

I saw the lids slide up. Her eyes opened and she turned her head slowly to look at me. "Well, you're

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not so brilliant yourself," she said.

I grinned.

It was truly a lovely face. Smooth, open, frank, the eyes a clear, almost luminous green. Lips bright and soft, moist and parted. I lowered my gaze. Fantastic breasts; remarkable.

"Ah—" I said. "Er, ah, why don't we get up and sit on the couch?"

"That's a good idea."

I scrambled up and got planted on the cushions while Sylvia, taking more time about it, rose easily to her feet and stretched, rubbing one hand against her back. Then she sat on the couch next to me.

She turned and smiled at me: went on with what she'd been saying. "Anyway, if it got told around, about me, maybe there'd be some who wouldn't want to put me up on a wall and shoot me down like a dead dog, but they'd be a minority."

"Class me in the minority," I said.

She smiled again and squinted her eyes at me. "But I'd have to get out of Hollywood. All the frustrated wives, unhappy widows, dried-up little girls having the fits, they'd see to that."

She closed her eyes and rubbed them gently with her fingers. "By the time they got finished, I *would* be ashamed."

She fell silent. I was thinking that maybe Sylvia was not the dumbest babe in the land. There's a difference between knowledge and wisdom, and Sylvia could be wise enough, when she wanted to. At least in my book.

No wonder she would offend the Bobby Prins in the realm of morality.

Bobby Prin? He was another Hollywood cat, but apparently a neutered one. He was, though a private citizen, generally to be found in the forefront of any drive against "Vice" or "Sex," seeming to have no comprehension of any difference between the two and as founder-President of his own "Citizen's League for the Advancement of Morality," a man who could be counted on to carry the banner of Virtue wherever the most heinous crimes against public morals—his private morals, presumably—could be found, exposed, closely examined, and attacked.

And why, I wondered, was I sitting here musing about intellects and Prins when Sylvia Ardent was strolling around the room? For that's what she was doing.

She'd gotten up from the couch and begun to pace back and forth, thinking, I guess.

She thought almost to the door, then turned and started back toward me saying, "Anyhow, it for sure would have been good-by career. And I really enjoy 'Girl's Dorm.' They write such nice words for me to say. And all the pretty clothes—"

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"Let me get this straight, Sylvia. Jellicoe had learned about your background—we can assume from Cheim—and told you he *did* know. Then he threatened you?"

She nodded. "He knew, all right. The time, name of the city where I was in those days. Not all of it but enough. He just told me either I did what he wanted or he'd spread the word around where it would do the most good—ruin me the most, that is. Producers, newspapers, the trades, all that. He didn't want money, though. Just—me."

"When was this? When did he first talk to you about it?"

"Last Friday. Early in the afternoon."

"So you went out with him Friday night?"

"Yes. That was part of it. Big night. Big night for him, maybe. He got a little drunk. But so did I." She paused. "Well, then we came here."

"You didn't see him Saturday? Haven't seen or heard from him since then?"

She shook her head, turned and walked across the room again.

"Sylvia," I said, "would you either go stand in the corner, or come over and sit on the couch? Anything, just so you stop moving."

She laughed, then walked to the couch and sat way over at the end, as far as she could get from me. She picked up a shocking-pink pillow, fluffed it in her hands, then put it behind her head and leaned back, sinking slowly onto two or three other bright pillows already there.

"Better?" she asked.

"Yeah. Lots. If I don't look."

So I looked away. Then, thinking, I scowled. Scowled some more, and turned my head back toward her.

I said, "So you thought *I* was pulling the same thing Jellicoe did. That's silly."

"Not to me, it wasn't. First thing you said to me was Tommy's name. Sort of, oh, sinisterly. Like Fu Manchu. What was I supposed to think?"

"How would *I* know?"

"Then you asked if we could go inside. At first you were smiling, but while we were on the couch you got almost as fierce-looking as you are right now."

She frowned. "And *just like Tommy*, you said you didn't want any money. So naturally I thought—"

"Just shut *up*. And don't say *'just like Tommy'* again. If he isn't dead already, I may break his neck."

She blinked. "You think he's *dead?"*

"Hell, I don't know. Not any more. It isn't my best day of the week. The year. Damn Denosia—never mind that. I've got to re-think my thinking."

I closed my eyes. Forced the vi-

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sion of Sylvia Ardent out of my mind, at least as far out as I could get it, and went mentally back to Mrs. Jellicoe.

That helped right away. So I traveled through thought from then till the moment when I'd rung the arrowhead at the door of this wigwam, and quickly brought it up to now, merely hitting the high-spots of what I had rather tortuously elicited from Sylvia.

Some of it now made a weird kind of sense, but not much. There was a big chunk missing.

One thing was sure: my next stop was to see Gideon Cheim. His name had been creeping in from the edges all day, and there was also the at-least on-the-job intimacy between Cheim and Jellicoe, Thomas being, or having been, his "right-hand arm" as Sylvia put it. She had also been yelling his name earlier—without joyousness, I'd thought.

So I opened my eyes and let myself look at her again.

She had crossed her legs. She still lay back on the pillows against the arm of the couch, one hand behind her neck and the other resting palm-up at her side, fingers curling. The big green eyes were half closed as she looked steadily at me.

"Don't do that," I said.

The lids slid up a bit. "I didn't do anything."

"Well, don't do it again. Look, earlier you were yelling about Gideon, Tommy, and me—when you, ah, misunderstood my motives. And you said, or at least intimated, it all started with Gideon. Would you mind explaining that?"

She sat up suddenly, uncrossing her long legs and folding both arms over her breasts. Then she waggled her head a little and said, "I might as well tell you all secrets there is, Daddy. She smiled. "Pretty soon I won't have *any* secrets from you."

"Gideon?"

"I made those pictures for him, the first two I mentioned. Bombs. Oh, they made money, but they were from hunger. From starvation. I was awful. And I was tied up in a long contract, nickels and dimes. Gideon was always calling me into his big office for one thing and another. We'd just talk, and he was always real kind, and like fatherly, but, you know, I could tell he was trying to get into my good gracious."

"I see. Your what?"

"One day he gave me a script. A *real* script. It was a marvelous part. Too good for me, really. I'm not that good an actress."

"Take it from me, you—"

"Let me finish, will you? Let me get it said." She stopped next to me, put a hand on my shoulder. "Just listen. You asked me."

She'd been pleasant, free and bubbling most of the time since I'd come here, but suddenly she bit into her lip and turned her head away. After a moment she went on,

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"He had a, an arrangement. I'd make a hundred-thousand dollars for doing the part. Ten times what I got from the others, plus a better contract. And the part could almost make me a star, it was so good. But there was a catch."

"I think I know what's coming."

"Sure, you do. Tommy all over again, only before Tommy." She stopped for a second or two. "That wasn't all of it. If I didn't—didn't make the picture, there were lots of things he could do to me, he said. He was still about the most powerful thing in Hollywood then. He—oh, hell, I made the stinking picture."

I didn't say anything, just sat there waiting for her to go on. Or maybe that was all of it. I glanced at my watch.

Sylvia was looking away from me, toward the door, but she noticed the movement.

"Can't wait to get out of here now?" she said.

"Why would I be—"

"Well, isn't a girl supposed to be —spoiled, if she—"

"Yeah? So who spoils them?"

She went on rapidly, "Well, don't I look *different,* now you know all the junk, and I was a call girl? But that was years ago—"

"You're not a call girl now, are you?"

"No." She smiled, a little bitterly, I thought. "Or if I am, I'm a damned expensive one!"

After a pause she turned on the couch to face me, looked into my eyes. "Come on; tell me the truth, Daddy. Don't you think I'm *spoiled?*"

"Yeah," I said; "almost as much as me. Now knock off this sorry-for-yourself jazz or I'll bust you right in the mouth."

She leaned toward me, breasts swinging gently forward. "I'll bust *you,*" she said.

Then she laughed merrily and the moment, whatever it had been, passed.

"Okay," I said. "We have carefully plumbed the depths of your depravity, but I still don't understand how the hell Cheim got onto your background, your scarlet past."

She was bright and bouncy again, a gal of moods, apparently. "Well, I was going to do the picture, you know, but there was still that condition, the arrangement, to take care of." She sighed heavily. "But all that time before, he'd been like a father to me, I thought. I felt like I was committing insect."

"He bugged you, huh?"

"Ack, yuck, it was an experience I'll never remember if I can forget it. "If he hadn't been so sennilee—"

"So what?"

"So sennilee—real ancient. Ack, yuck."

"Senile?"

"What's that?"

"Skip it. You were saying?"

"That's why it made me feel like

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—you *do* know what committing insect is, don't you?"

"Frankly, I never thought about it. It never even entered my mind."

"Anyway, like I was saying, for weeks after it he kept winking at me and pinching me hither and yon, and acting like God's gift to poor working girls. It was one day when he was pinching and pinching and crowing at me like a rooster I got fed up and really let him have it."

"Again?"

"I told him not to be such a swell head and to quit acting like he was the first man to get in my life. That's when, to take his peg down, I told him I'd been a call girl for six months once—when I didn't have *any* money, and it wasn't like he was number one with me but more like maybe one million. I was exaggerating, of course."

"I hope."

"He got the idea. I really said some sharp things to him. He got real cold and mean and like he was going to have a whole lot of strokes. I think he hired some detectives and they checked back to when I was a call girl. That's the only way anybody would have known about it. I sure wouldn't have mentioned it to him except he got on my nerve so much."

I was trying to fit all of that together when Sylvia suddenly jumped up.

"I don't care what you say," she said. "I've got to *move.*"

She walked over to the door and back, then to the rustic wooden bar in the corner and sat facing me on a stool there for a while, arms pushed straight down before her, hands between her thighs and curled around the arc of wood on which she was perched.

"Something I still don't get," I said. "Why would Cheim have told Jellicoe all that info about you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Tommy didn't tell me how he knew. But he knew. That was enough."

"If Cheim had detectives check up on you, I suppose it's possible Jellicoe got a look at their reports to his boss. Either that or Cheim told him." I paused. "Did, ah, do you suppose Jellicoe also knew about Cheim and you? The arrangement?"

"I think he did. I can't be sure, but he was so close to everything, contracts and the goings-on. And he acted a little funny around me, after. I'd take a bet he did know. Why?"

"I was just wondering. How long ago was that?"

"Three and a half years. When I got the TV offer, the picture was a big hit, and I managed to get out of the movie contract. No trouble. Gideon didn't try to keep me."

"I was just wondering if maybe Jellicoe had been sort of eating his heart out for three and a half years. I know he had a couple pictures of you in his suite."

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"No kidding? I didn't know that." She slid off the stool. "Well, that's how it happened, Daddy. There it is, the story of my life, if you can call it living."

"Why do you keep calling me Daddy? I'm no insect."

"It's not like father, you dummy. I don't know—when I like a fellow real well, I just call him Daddy."

"Oh, yeah? Well. Well, by golly," I said.

She'd stopped in front of me again. "You don't look so fierce when you smile like that," she said. "You look nice and goofy."

I could feel my smile fall off. "Thanks a mess."

"I mean in those clothes especially," she said. "I like crazy clothes, myself. But I don't think I've ever seen—"

"Look, I dressed in the dark, O.K.? I've gone Hollywood."

"You look real good to me, Daddy. But I'll call you Shell if you want. Daddy, that's just a pet name. No more questions?"

"I guess not."

"I suppose you have to leave."

"Pretty quick. I'm going to conduct a little session with Gideon."

"Don't tell him I told you—"

"I won't."

"I can trust you?"

"You can trust me."

"I wonder. Maybe you don't mean everything you say."

"What the hell are you getting at?"

"Well, I know you're not a dirty old blackmailer now."

"What does that mean?"

"We'll see," she said. "We'll see."

"What does *that* mean?"

She didn't answer. But instead she did a very strange thing. At least for a while it seemd very strange.

Sylvia took three long gliding steps toward me, stopped inches away. Her arms were hanging at her sides, palms of her hands pressed against the smooth, firm thighs. Then she slid her hands up slowly, around my neck.

Her lips were warm and generous against mine.

"We'll see," she said.

6

THE TOP was down on my Cad convertible, and as I turned into the Pasadena Freeway I reached under the dash for the mobile phone and placed a call to my office in the Hamilton Building. While waiting for the connection I thought fondly once more of Mrs. Jellicoe. What if the old bat hadn't hired me? Maybe I should send out a dozen roses for her to wither. Good old miserable Mrs. Jellicoe.

Hazel, at the Hamilton's switchboard, came on, "Mr. Scott's office."

"Hi, Hazel. Let me talk to Scott. Good old Scott."

"Are you drunk again?"

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"At—" I checked my watch—"at three-thirty in the morning?"

"It's afternoon."

"That's what I meant. Well, what do you know? My watch in on upside down. No wonder—"

"You shouldn't be driving in your condition. Are you curious about anything, or do you just want to talk?"

"I told various citizens to phone in if they came up with info for me. Any calls? And did you do any good checking the hospital?"

"Nothing on Mr. Jellicoe in the hospitals. And only three calls, all from the same man. He's very anxious to talk to you."

"What's his name."

"Mr. Cheim. Gideon Cheim. He left his number—"

"Cheim? I'll be damned."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm on my way to see him right now, that's all. He say what he wanted with me?"

"No. Only that it was most urgent, and he wants to see you in person. He left word where you could reach him. He's in a hospital."

"I know. That's it?"

"That's it."

"Thanks, sweetie. I'll buy you a strawberry milkshake."

"You'll buy me a very expensive dinner at Scandia."

The line was disconnected. I hung up.

Cheim was recuperating in the Weston-Macey Hospital, a small private hospital on the outskirts of Pasadena. It was not only small, but exclusive, the prime requirements for admission being at least a suspicion of malaise, and a ton of money. It was, however, one of the best in the land.

Before calling Hazel I'd done a little homework. It consisted primarily of checking recent newspapers for stories about Gideon Cheim which I'd had no reason to study before this.

He'd had a close call. Very close. He'd been admitted to Weston-Macey on Monday, June 27th, and operated on the following day. The day after that he was dying, at least to judge by the virtual obituaries in the stories I read. Thursday was a repeat of Wednesday, more of the same. But on Friday, the first day of July, he began to improve and then practically sprang out of the casket. He was taken off the critical list that night, rapidly gained strength and relative vigor, and by Saturday afternoon was

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sitting up in bed. Sometimes it's like that.

And now the creepy old warrior wanted to see me. Well, he was going to.

As I walked down the hallway, a white-uniformed nurse smiled at me, her low-heeled shoes squeaking on the highly-polished floor. I stopped at the door of room number 16 and knocked. A low, rumbling voice, which didn't sound as if it came from the throat of a sick man, bellowed, "Come in."

I went inside, closed the door behind me.

It was a spacious room, cheery draperies open before a wide window that looked out on green lawn and massed banks of flowers. In here there were cut flowers in three vases, new-looking furniture, a TV set. Gideon Cheim sat erect in the wide hospital bed, pillows propped behind him, wearing a short-sleeved blue pajama top and with the covers drawn up to his waist.

"Mr. Scott?" he said.

I'd phoned the hospital before getting here, so he'd been expecting me. "That's right. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. I understand you're looking for Tom Jellicoe. I am vitally interested in his whereabouts. And welfare. Tell me what you've learned."

Just like that. Yeah, I knew the type.

Even stuck in a hospital bed, climbing back from the six-foot pit, he gave out the impression of bulk, solidity. The flesh of his arms was a little stringy, and his face seemed to sag just a bit, but for a man of seventy, nine days past tricky heart surgery, he looked in good shape.

He was a large man, big-boned, with a great head dominated by a fleshy, wide nose and thick lips. His eyes were almost black, the skin puckered around them, and he didn't have much hair left. He'd been a rip-snorter in his day, and he probably wasn't through snorting yet.

"Well?"

Abrupt. Loud and impatient. The tone of command. One of those guys who would love to be dictator of the world.

I grinned.

"I think not, Mr. Cheim," I said.

He scowled. His black-and-gray eyebrows were thick and bushy, and grew together over the bridge of his nose.

"Confound it," he bellowed. "I asked you a question. I want to know what you've found, if anything. Don't worry, I'll pay you."

I turned around and walked out.

I was stamping my feet in the hallway before he let out a roar, "Come back here, you. *Come back here!*"

It was a good thing he'd roared. Because I wasn't going anywhere. And I'd have felt a little unhappy opening the door again and peeking inside.

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I waited a few seconds, not many, then entered the room.

"You called?" I said.

"You damn bet I called. Damn near tore out all my bloody stitches. What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I've already got a client. I don't have to report to you, Mr. Cheim. I'd like some answers myself, though. I've been looking for Thomas Jellicoe, sure. But how did you know it?"

He opened his wide mouth and got ready to squeeze another bellow out of it, then shut his mouth. He pushed his lips together and forward, pulled that one long, shaggy eyebrow down over his eyes. "You're an impertinent son," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I do not know who your client is. I did not even know you had one. However, there are in this city a large number of individuals who gladly, even eagerly, convey to me information about anything in which they believe I might be interested. Nearly all of them know Mr. Jellicoe has for years been my most trusted and valued associate. So far, six individuals have told me that Shell Scott has been in contact with informants, with the police, with hospitals—including *this* hospital—and that he is looking for Mr. Jellicoe. And when they conveyed this intelligence they were not so goddamned impertinent—"

"Okay, I'm looking for Jellicoe —still. I don't know where he is. Obviously you don't know either. What do you want? Jellicoe? If I find him I'll bring him here and tuck him in bed with you." I paused. "Hell, you could have told me that on the phone."

I turned toward the open door again.

"Hold still, damn you," he said.

"I hate to hit weak old men, lying on their death beds," I said jovially. "But I think it would be nice if you quit swearing your head off at me."

He squeezed his eyes shut, lifted his arms, closed the big hands into fists, and swatted the covers.

After a while he opened one eye, then the other, and said, "Does it annoy you that I would be pleased to know where my old friend and associate is? Or that I would be overjoyed, should you now know or later discover the whereabouts of my old friend and associate, if you would be generous enough to tell me? Or even give me a hint?

"Does it astonish you that I actually prefer this course to getting out of bed and looking for him myself, staggering through the streets clutching my heart in one hand and my aching backside in the other? Does it beggar your comprehension that—"

"I may be able to help. Sorry about your piles, by the way."

"God damn you, sir!"

"Mr. Cheim, if you'll answer a few questions—not at great length

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—it might help me to find Mr. Jellicoe."

He took a deep breath, let it out. "Well?"

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"The day I entered the hospital. Shortly before I came here."

"June twenty-seventh," I said. He pushed his lips out a little, staring at me, but didn't say anything. I asked, "Have you heard from him since then?"

"I spoke to him briefly, by phone, early last Saturday afternoon."

"Well, I can do only a little better than that," I said. "At least I know he was still alive late Saturday night."

The reaction was not violent, but it was unmistakable. When I said "still alive" both of Cheim's hands jerked and the corners of his lips bent down suddenly.

He said, "Have you any reason to assume he might not now be alive?"

"No, only that sometimes people who stay missing for several days turn up dead. No other reason."

He seemed relieved.

"No other reason," I added, "except that it's a bit odd he hasn't been in touch with his old friend and associate, isn't it? That is, if he's physically able to contact you? Assuming, of course, that he wants to."

"Ah, yes," he said.

Something was queer as hell here, but I didn't have any idea what it was yet. And I was sure there was more in his head than he'd said.

"Mr. Cheim, you asked to see me. Here I am. If all you wanted to know was whether I'd located Jellicoe, I'll be on my way."

"Well, ah—there is one other thing."

Here it comes, I thought. But I kept my expression noncommittal. "Yes?"

"I am primarily interested, you understand, in the safety and welfare of Mr. Jellicoe. There is also another matter, minor by comparison, but of importance to me. For the last two years I have been putting into manuscript from the story of my life. An autobiography, which I call 'I.' I think you will agree with me that the life story of Gideon Cheim would be a document of great value."

He waited expectantly for me to comment, so I said, "By golly."

I suppose he was right. Cheim was as much a part of the movie industry, its growth and history, as any other man alive. Undoubtedly he knew tales of Hollywood, its giants and inflated pygmies, its foundations and facades and even frauds, that few if any other individuals knew. His autobiography would be an interesting and historically valuable book.

Cheim went on, "When I entered the hospital, I knew I was facing an operation which might

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prove fatal. I therefore entrusted the completed manuscript to Mr Jellicoe, with instructions that, in the event of my death, he deliver it to a publisher with whom I have already made appropriate arrangements for the book's posthumous publication." He placed a hand over his heart. "When I am gone, the book will at least stand as a monument to my life."

He paused once more, expectantly.

I didn't say anything.

Cheim finally took his hand off his heart. "If I survived the necessary surgery, Mr. Jellicoe was to return the manuscript to me. Four days after my operation I had recovered sufficiently to speak with him by phone. and told him to bring the manuscript to me the following day."

"That's the call you mentioned making last Saturday afternoon," I said. "You also told me you hadn't seen Jellicoe since the twenty-seventh. So your old friend and associate didn't show up the next day."

He said, "He did not. Therefore the manuscript has not yet been delivered again into my possession. Mr. Jellicoe appreciates its value, and I am certain would have returned the manuscript to me on Sunday had it been possible. I am therefore deeply concerned. About him—*and* the manuscript."

"You've several times mentioned the manuscript's value," I said. "You don't suppose Jellicoe might have thought he had his hands on a good thing, maybe? And deliberately failed to return it to you because—"

That didn't bother Cheim a bit. "No, Mr. Scott. I assume you do not know Mr. Jellicoe. I do. He is not an individual capable of such an act. Fear would destroy him. He is not a man of much daring, or courage." Cheim paused. "To be blunt, he knows very well what I would do to him should he in any way incur my displeasure. He is—I have made him cognizant of my power, and the lengths to which I will go ensure that justice is visited upon those who would attempt to injure or revile me."

He sounded like an avenging angel. I said, "I'll go along with that. You're a mean one, and your old buddy knows it. But you yourself said there was a good chance you'd kick the bucket right here in the Weston-Macey. He wouldn't worry about your visiting justice upon him if you were dead."

"Mr. Scott, he knows I am *not* dead. I personally spoke to him by phone when I instructed him to return the manuscript to me on Sunday. And I am not *going* to die."

The way he said that last part, it sounded as if he meant, "not *ever.*" But he was right. Jellicoe would have known Cheim was nearly as lusty and roaring as ever.

"Well, what are you getting at,

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Mr. Cheim?" I said. "Why tell me all this?"

"I intend to employ you to find that manuscript and return it to me. Since you are already looking for Mr. Jellicoe—"

"Just a second. I am looking for him. That's the job I've been retained to do. And until I wrap that up one way or another I can't take on another client."

It griped him. "You refuse?" he bellowed.

"Maybe you don't get it. I've got a client, and a job to do for that client. I take them on one at a time."

He started to speak, stopped, then said, "All right. I understand. You are employed to find Mr. Jellicoe. Do it, if you can, for your client. But for me, endeavor to find and return the manuscript. It need not interfere with your primary objective: it is a parallel objective. And if you are successful in returning the manuscript to me I will pay you any reasonable fee."

I started to tell him if I stumbled over his precious autobiography I'd bring it back to him for nothing. But playing a hunch I said, "Like what?"

"Name your price, Scott."

"How about ten thousand dollars?"

Cheim sat staring quietly at me for perhaps three silent seconds, then said, "All right."

I leaned on the foot of his bed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cheim," I said. "I wasn't serious. I guess I was merely curious to know how anxious you are to get that manuscript back."

Well, I got an idea then of just how mean this old boy could be if he wanted to. I had rarely seen anger burning in a man's eyes the way it burned now in his. It was as though previously banked fires swelled in their blackness. And the mouth changed a little, a slight twist, a bit more firmness, became very hard, and cruel.

"You mean you will not aid me in any way?"

"Not at all. I'll keep an eye open for the manuscript, now that I know about it. I might even get lucky and find the thing. But I'm not going to let it interfere with my job until I know where Jellicoe is, or what happened to him. After that the situation will be maybe a bit different."

He didn't say anything, but after a while he nodded slightly.

I said, "Maybe you'd better tell me what it looks like. Is it just a stack of paper? Typed, handwritten? What do I look for?"

"A sensible question. It is written in my own hand, but you will not look for a manuscript as such. I placed the papers in an attache case, and locked it." He held his hands apart to indicate its length and depth.

"Locked, huh? You want to give me the key? I mean, so if I get

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lucky I can check the contents, make sure it's the right—"

"That will not be necessary. I then wrapped the case in heavy paper and sealed it with sealing-wax in which I made an impression of this ring." He held up his right hand.

"You really trust Jellicoe, don't you? And the rest of the world. Just like a prince of old, with sealing-wax and the royal crest." I stopped. "Red wax?"

"Yes, and there is no justification for you to assume that my elementary precautions—"

"Wait a minute." I was remembering that small red "pebble" or whatever it was I'd found in the third drawer from the top in Thomas Jellicoe's bureau. I said, "All sealing-wax could do for you, Mr. Cheim, is let you know if somebody did get to the case. But it wouldn't prevent anybody from opening it."

"Had the case been unsealed and unlocked, Thomas might out of consuming curiosity have opened it for a peek. But he would not dare—"

"He would. I think he did. For more than a peek. So now you know the barn door's open, but alas, the horse is gone." I hadn't finished, but he was already getting a stricken look.

I told him about the upheaval in Jellicoe's suite, and the little pebble of sealing wax I'd found in the bureau drawer. His mouth was open, lips loose, and he looked so pale I didn't know whether to continue or not.

But I finished it up, "Here's one not-unlikely possibility. Jellicoe opened the case, read your manuscript, figured he could make a piece of change by selling Gideon Cheim's authentic, hand-written autobiography, and sold it. In fact—"

I stopped. It looked as if Gideon Cheim was about to stop permanently. His mouth was opening and closing and his head had flopped back on the pillows behind him. I jumped to the side of the bed, but he was already starting to sit up, reaching for something in the pocket of his pajama top.

"Water," he croaked, as he pulled a small vial from his pocket, thumbed off the cork and popped a little tablet into his mouth.

I spotted a pitcher, poured sloppily, handed him the brimming glass. He gulped at it, spilling water over his chin and down onto his pajamas. I looked for the buzzer, ready to call nurses, doctors, ambulances, saw the cord dangling at the side of his bed and grabbed it.

"No," he said, "that won't be necessary." He didn't sound so croaky this time. "I'll be all right in a moment," he continued. "Do not ring. Just one moment." He drank some more water, without spilling any.

I hadn't pushed the little button,

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but if he so much as rolled his eyes I was going to press it.

In a few more seconds he handed me the glass. "Thank you. I'm all right. It was the—shock. It's impossible. I cannot believe that Thomas' would dare to disobey me. It is *impossible.*"

"Think about it," I said, thinking myself. "Check the dates, the timing. You gave Jellicoe the manuscript when you entered Weston-Macey. You were operated on the next day. On Wednesday and Thursday every paper in town—and most of the country—had you dying."

My voice rose a little as the picture got clearer, and I started getting excited as pieces fell into place. "You were as good as dead. The old warhorse was neighing his last nicker, *Farewell old Paint* and all that. You were getting rigid in a casket, eyes glazing, death rattle in your throat."

The expression of suffering on his face decided me to change my imagery. "Gideon Cheim," I continued, "giant of Hollywood, was slipping, slipping away from the scenes of his boyhood and gianthood, the light dimming in his kindly old eyes—"

"You needn't overdo it."

"Yeah, well, I read those penultimate obits myself. Even on Friday the world was waving good-by. It wasn't until sometime Saturday that it was clear you'd passed the crisis, were on the mend."

"Are you making any kind of point at all, Mr. Scott?"

"A most important point." I paused a moment to line up the words in the way most likely to impress Cheim. "Most of the country thought you were dying. And people aren't basically rational most of the time. They generally believe what they *want* to believe—ah I don't mean to imply that most of the country wanted you to kick the bucket, sir. But, if you will pardon the frankness, I've a strong hunch that Thomas Jefferson *Jellicoe* might have been hoping against hope for years that Gideon Cheim would kick the bucket. I don't know a hell of a lot about him, but I know a little about you, and—Well, I won't overdo it. I'll just ask you, Mr. Cheim, if you think I *might* be right."

He glared at me with an expression like a meat-axe. "It is possible. I demand loyalty of my subjects. They do not have to fall in love with me."

"Jellicoe thought you were dying. He was free at last. So he opened the case, and to hell with the sealing wax. Why worry? Gideon Cheim was dead, kaput, deceased—"

"Will you stop harping on that?" he said grimly.

"Well, Jellicoe opened the case, perused the pages, sold the script."

"Impossible—"

"In fact, though I don't know how he managed it, I'd say he sold

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it for fifty-five thousand dollars. How else—"

I stopped. It was happening again. I sprang to the water pitcher, poured another glass. But this time Cheim didn't need it. He gasped a little and made some highly unsanitary noises, but after a crowded lull of about a minute was talking again. Still shook, but not dying. Boy, he was hard to kill.

"Fifty-five-thousand dollars? Why do you say that? How could you know about my fifty-five thousand dollars?"

"Your fifty-five thousand?"

"Of course, you idiot. I placed in the attache case not merely the manuscript but fifty-five thousand dollars in cash."

"Five hundred and fifty hundred-dollar bills," I said.

"Aaah, my God, it's true, then!" He was having another small attack. But they didn't bother me much any more. I was getting hardened to them. "The bastard!" Cheim gasped. "He did it! He stole it. How could he? What happened?"

"What happened is, as I keep saying, he thought of you as dead, as the late Gideon Cheim. He wasn't terrified by the thought of you any more. What the hell is all this about fifty-five G's? Why money in the case?"

He swore at Jellicoe a little longer, then paused. He looked at me then and said quietly, "I think I had better explain everything. The situation is truly desperate now."

"You get the point, don't you? Assuming Jellicoe opened the case and found the manuscript *and* money, that was when he thought of you as dead, or as good as dead, which was the next best thing."

"Will you quit—"

"But then, while at the peak of his euphoria, *zowie*—who calls him, big as life? Gideon Cheim! It must have been like getting a collect call from a cemetery."

"Mr. Scott."

"Yeah. But if he had *already* sold the manuscript— But if he had the fifty-five G's he didn't need to sell it, did he? However, if he'd spent the money, he'd be in a sweat. He'd *have* to get the money back."

"Let me explain. I entrusted the attache case and its contents to Mr. Jellicoe, as I have already informed you. I told him only that my autobiography was in it, plus an envelope to be delivered to the publisher I had chosen. I also told Mr. Jellicoe there was an unspecified amount of cash to compensate him for his trouble, should, of course, it be necessary for him to take any action at all."

"So he did know there was money in the case."

"A comparatively small amount for him, yes. Actually, five thousand dollars, though I did not inform him of the amount. He did

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not know what was in the publisher's envelope. It contained fifty thousand dollars and a note from me, merely corroborating the understanding we had previously reached."

Something wiggled inside my skull. He was paying a publisher to print his book posthumously. Why posthumously? I had already sized up Cheim as the kind of guy who wouldn't shrink from personal praise, or effusive adulation. Why then did he have to be dead before his book could be published?

I said, "This clears something up, sort of. I knew Jellicoe had suddenly come into a pile of cash. I assumed he'd sold the manuscript. But, obviously, he didn't need to."

"He could have, however. He still could." Cheim's face was grim. "To any number of people," he added.

And suddenly the darkness disappeared.

It was as though everything I knew about Jellicoe, and Cheim, and even Gladys, and Sylvia Ardent, and all that had happened today, blended into one glowing idea which rose over the edge of my brain like the sun rising over the horizon.

I smiled, not too sweetly, at Gideon Cheim and said, "Like whom? Name some of that number for me."

There was a momentary hesitation. He was going to have to tell me more than he'd intended. One of his subjects, Tom Jellicoe, had ridden the king's horse out of the barn. And it was a horse of a different color.

"I already know what's coming," I said. "So if you'll lay it out fast, I'll have that much more time to look for Tom Jellicoe today. And for 'I', the autobiography of Gideon Cheim. And a much better idea of where to look."

He plunged right into it. "The autobiography is the story of my life. The true story. In addition, it challenges the slanders and refutes the lies directed against me during my life and especially during this past decade. To effectively accomplish this it was necessary for me to reveal much about other individuals, information which, unfortunately, might in some cases prove embarrassing to those individuals."

"Names and dates and places and such?" I said.

"True names in some cases. In others, the identities and events disguised. There are laws of libel to consider."

Sure, I thought. And to circumvent when possible. But a man like Cheim could skirt pretty near the edge, especially when he expected to be dead and buried before publication. And when he'd already paid the publisher fifty thousand clams.

There are, too, disguises and disguises. In Hollywood there are

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always rumors floating around, stories about Miss A or Mr. X, this married couple or that fascinating orgy, this startling indiscretion or even, sometimes, that major crime —items rarely even suspected by the public at large, but whispered or laughed about by the "in" crowd, at parties or in barrooms and bedrooms.

Usually they remain merely in the category of juicy rumors, though someone, somewhere, always knows the truth behind the rumor, which on occasion is even more juicy or shocking than the rumor itself.

Undoubtedly Gideon Cheim was, in the case of some of those rumors, the "someone, somewhere" who held truth by the tail; and apparently in his autobiography he had let it go. Even where false names and invented times and places were used, the stories could be made sufficiently accurate that the "in" crowd would know, automatically, who were the real individuals involved. Cheim could have made sure of that—and, I thought, would have.

"Go on," I said.

I'd been standing all this time, so while he spoke I pulled a chair over near Cheim's bed, found an ashtray, sat down. When he finishel talking in generalities I said, "That won't do, Mr. Cheim. That manuscript is a bomb, and you know it. We both know it. It's ticking under a lot of derrieres right now. And Jellicoe may be lighting some fuses."

"I can't accept—"

"Just a minute. I might be missing something, but here's what could have happened. Jellicoe grabbed the dough, pored over the manuscript. He used some of the money to pay off a debt. Then he checked over your revealing autobiography again to pick out the people named who would be, on the basis of information revealed in the manuscript, most susceptible to blackmail."

"Impossible. That is preposterous. Damn you, there is no blackmail—"

"Knock it off, I happen to know Jellicoe *did* pay off a debt, a very pressing one, and that he did use info from the manuscript for blackmail. At least I'll give ten to one he got the dirt from a few paragraphs of your autobiography—in which paragraphs, I'll wager you came out smelling like a field of violets."

He didn't get griped at my language. Something else was more important. "You know he did attempt to blackmail someone?"

"Yes. And succeeded."

"Who?"

"That's privileged information. In other words, I'm not going to tell you."

"But it was Jellicoe? You're sure of that?"

"Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe. And I'm positive."

He thought a moment. "But you

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said his rooms were searched. In great disarray—"

"Look. When he started out on his great adventure, he thought you were—I hate to remind you again—dead, or at least dying. He was already in the soup when you so speedily and shockingly recovered. He had to give you back the manuscript. And the money, don't forget. He had to get back the money. Or simply take a fast powder, make it look as if he's been killed, kidnaped, robbed, anything. Mainly he would have needed time. Time to put everything back into a neat wax-sealed package for you."

Cheim was nodding, following my words closely.

I went on, "Again, this is a guess, but an educated one. Think of Jellicoe, after he'd talked to you. Scared, worse off than before. What would he have of value, except the manuscript? And how could he raise money with it? Two ways. Sell it. Or repeat the process he already knew to be successful: Blackmail."

Cheim didn't even object to the word this time.

I went on, "In which case he's somewhere out in the city, putting the bite on citizens, squeezing them for dough, learning the ins and outs of one of the creepiest of crimes: extortion. Thanks to the dirt you handed him."

I leaned back in the chair, lit a cigarette, and wrapped it up. "He wouldn't pick the people who'd merely be embarrassed, not the ones who'd just blush. He'd squeeze the ones who'd be ruined by revelation, and from among those the ones who could, and would, pay cold hard cash. You know who they'd be, who they are. And you'd better tell me."

He told me.

I stubbed out my last cigarette and stood up.

"You're a sweet one," I said. "You must have tried to get even with everybody who ever looked cross-eyed at you. I'm glad you told me about some of them, at least. But, frankly, I don't understand why you did. To get even with Jellicoe?"

He didn't answer for a while. I didn't know whether he was trying to decide whether or not to tell me the truth, or making up something phony to tell me.

But after a while he looked up at me and said, apprently with complete sincerity, "It isn't important what you think of my actions. I did, in writing that manuscript, reveal much which could cause great suffering to many. I did it deliberately. But now I am repelled that I should have done so."

He was silent for several seconds. Then he said quietly, "I was very close to death, Mr. Scott. Very close, for the first time in my life. An experience like that changes a man, believe it or not."

I thought that was all. Rather a

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nice spot for my exit. But then he added, "You must get back the manuscript. You must. So I can destroy it."

"Oh? Well, if I find the thing, why don't I just save you the trouble, and burn it—"

"My God, no! The—other, the parts about *me*. That can't be destroyed."

"I suppose not," I said. "I suppose the world should know of the glorious life of Gideon Cheim. I get the impression you made it sound like the second coming of Buddha. It's a shame, but if you hadn't put the rest of that junk in it, we could all be reading about your glory right now. All of us, including you."

His lips moved around, and his shaggy black-and-gray brows waggled. I think he was weighing one goodie against the other, unable to make up his mind which was better. He appeared still undecided when I left.

7

CHEIM HAD told me a dozen or more tales, complete with names. Only half a dozen of them, though, fell into the category of potential blackmail victims—men or women not only with plenty to lose but possessed of plenty with which to pay. And of those I'd selected three as the most likely prospects, the cream of the pluckable crop.

Jellicoe, I reasoned, would have been, and would be, in a hurry. He had to have $40,000, the portion of Cheim's fifty G's which he'd paid to Norm Lawson, and which he would have to add to his bank account in order to return both manuscript and total loot to Cheim. If, of course, that's what he had in mind. And if so, he would put the pressure on one, or more, both willing and able to pay $40,000.

The three I'd decided upon not only fit the bill, but were three of the best known—and at the same time, wealthiest—individuals in the land. It seemed logical to me that Jellicoe, or any blackmailer possessing the dirt scattered in "I," would first hit at least one, if not all, of those three. If he had contacted them, or even one of them, I felt confident that would be the beginning of the end for Jellicoe. Because I also felt confident they would tell me about it.

After all, I now knew as much about them as did Jellicoe.

The three were:

Warren Barr, number-one box-office draw of the studio formerly headed by Gideon Cheim. Tall, broad, magnetic, hard-bodied and hard-eyed. It was alleged he gave women goose-bumps in the most unlikely places. As well as the likely ones.

He was a "man's man," too, quick with his fists. He'd been in half a dozen barroom brawls in the

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last three years. Handy with a gun, dead-eye with a rifle aimed at charging bear, fleeing elk, swift cheetah, soaring bird, or even rabbit, if nothing more sporting was in range.

He was one of that great company of alleged sportsmen who delight in killing animals for fun, knocking them over like ten-pins in the hallowed name of sport. He was a jerk. Even ignoring what Cheim had told me, he was a jerk.

Bobby Prin: Yes, *the* Bobby Prin. The Carrie Nation of genitalia, the one-man Juggernaut, crushing the sweetness out of sex and the life out of Life. Robert Victor Caesar Prin, fifty-four years old, with approximately a million bucks for each decade, leader of the misled, the blind leading the blinded. In a couple of words, a sanctimonious s.o.b. But I had located his zipper. And Prin was undone.

Zena Tabur: The gal most male movie-goers past puberty would most like to be stranded on the moon with. Sure it's ridiculous. But she'd won the ridiculous contest to select the femme movie queen who best filled that bill. Significantly, she'd won by a million votes.

Not tall, she easily made up in other dimensions than height for her lack of lissomeness, a lack to which nobody this side of the moon had yet objected.

She looked much like her name: dark skin, slanted eyes, torchy lips, thick black hair that tumbled and waved all the way down to her derriere, which unquestionably belonged in the forefront of any collection of memorable behinds.

She was Turkish or Egyptian, or something else, from Istanbul or Tangier or—nobody really knew for sure, it was said. But she looked like, and her voice sounded like, a potpourri of all that and the best houris of the Arabian Nights. She'd shot her husband. Shot him dead. Only nobody really knew that for sure, either. Well, a few people did. Cheim. Maybe Jellicoe. And I.

A very male man, a very female woman, and a Prin in the middle.

And that was the order in which I was going to call on them.

I was in the Cadillac, top still down, with the warm, late-afternoon breeze rubbing my face. Three calls on my under-the-dash phone had pinpointed Warren Barr for me. He was on location, doing retakes for a nearly completed Western in some scenes of which he'd not been brave enough to suit him. The location was ten miles ahead, out in the rolling hills not far from Hollywood, hills where hundred of cavalrymen and thousands of Indians had bitten the dust. Where, conceivably, since he was a hot-tempered character and would not like what I

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had to say, Warren Barr might bite the dust.

On the way, I thought of other items Cheim had revealed. He'd included a couple of stories more than usually interesting to me. One about Norman Lawson, one about Sylvia Ardent.

It appeared that Lawson, prior to establishing residence and office in Hollywood, had been a member of the legislature in another state. A number of individuals of somewhat dubious character desired to build and operate a dog-racing track near the capitol city. There were difficulties, opposition, legal hurdles.

A group of legislators, in league with the lieutenant governor, in time overcame the difficulties, defeated the opposition, and overcame the legal hurdles—by pushing through the legislature a lovely new law which eliminated them entirely. Several legislators, including Norman Lawson, were defeated in the next election. But all of them, and the lieutenant governor, wound up with stock in the dog-racing track. Norman's shares, valuable then, were worth a million and a half dollars today. An operation not unprecedented, and one unlikely to send Lawson to the slammer; but not anything he'd want noised about.

At least, if Cheim's facts were accurate. Probably they were, in essence, like the Sylvia Ardent story, since apparently nothing in the deal reflected on Cheim himself.

As in what he'd told me about Sylvia. That she'd been a call girl, time and place of her then residence, intimate details. He'd even dug up—Cheim admitted he'd employed a large private detective agency at considerable expense—names of hotels, private homes, even spicy quotes from a few apparently hugely-satisfied individuals. But, oddly, not a word about Sylvia and Gideon Cheim.

I had wanted very much to mention the hundred-thousand-dollar "contract," and even ask him if he'd classed it as business expense. But I didn't.

Warren Barr was sitting in a canvas-backed chair, smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper. Fifty feet away men were moving cameras, setting up reflectors, stepping over what looked like miles of electrical cables. A man in Bermuda shorts and a bright striped shirt was standing at the base of a huge camera-boom, shouting at them and cursing with a richness of invective wonderful to hear.

"How do you do, Mr. Barr."

He looked up.

"I'm Shell Scott. I'd like a few words with you, if you don't mind."

"I do mind. So beat it." He glanced past me at the activity, then down at his paper, and let me look at his hair.

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It was worth looking at. He had the kind of hair that bald men can see from a distance of two and a quarter miles, at dusk, on a foggy day. It was thick and luxurious, healthily abundant, gently waving, a center of hirsute splendor which would have been noticeable even in a universe of hair, and it was a wig.

I hadn't seen his teeth yet, but I knew they were expertly porcelain-capped. I also knew that when he rose to his full six-foot height he was standing on cowboy boots built up on the inside another two inches. I'd learned lots about him today; but those were only the incidentals.

"Well, that's tough," I said. "You're going to get a few words anyway."

He didn't move for a moment. Then slowly he crumpled the edges of the newspaper, and followed that by opening his hands and carefully mashing the whole paper into a little ball. Just about the way he would have done it on camera, I guessed.

Then he gave it a casual little toss, stood up, and—I believe—commenced to hit me.

I moved my feet a little. "Don't make me knock your hair off," I said. "I won't report you to the fuzz, friend. I'll report you to the county hospital."

He had his right hand down at his side, balled into a fist, but he held it there for a moment longer.

"What's with the big mouth?" he said.

"That's the way I talk to big-mouths. Who started the tough-man bit?"

He took a good look at me, then let his hand relax. Probably not because I'd scared him, however.

He was a tough boy. I knew he was a tough boy.

I said, "Have you decided not to pop me?"

He said a foul word, adding, "At least for now."

"Well, then I can tell you now. I didn't want to until you'd made up your mind. But if you'd popped me, that would have been a felony, wouldn't it?"

Warren Barr was very tanned. Almost as brown from the sun as I am. He looked very healthy. But not for long.

Unless you've seen a very tanned guy get very, very pale beneath the tan, you wouldn't recognize the color which overtook his features. It was as if all the blood dropped to his elevator boots. He

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sat down suddenly in the canvas chair.

"You could go back," I said.

He just sat there, sucking air through his nose and letting it sigh from his mouth for a while. Then he looked up at me and said, not so surly this time, "Well, spit it out. I guess you know the whole bit."

"Yeah, I do. Me and the other guy."

He blinked two or three times. "Other guy?"

"Yeah."

He shook his head, puzzled.

I believed he really was puzzled, and if so, that was all I'd come here to find out. But to make sure I said, "Another guy—at least, somebody else—already hit you with this, right? In the last few days?"

He shook his head. "Not in the seven years I've been in this stinking town. You're the first." Barr rubbed the back of one hand over his stubbled—for his current role—chin. "Maybe you don't know what you're talking about."

I gave him the date, the city, the state, and the sentence. "You fought under the name Tiger Yates. You were good. Not as big as you are now—not as wide, I mean, you've put on more muscle. But you were good. Outside the ring, too. The first two amateurs you knocked around dropped the charges. A pro who clobbers an amateur in effect commits ADW. Assault with a deadly weapon. But I guess you know."

"I guess I sure as little brown berries do," he said, only he didn't really say "little brown berries."

"But the third time, you fell for it, friend. And did more than a year. Then to Hollywood, fame and fortune. But you've popped a few out here, too, haven't you?"

He didn't say whether he had or hadn't. Everybody knew he had. He did say, "What're you after? You want to retire in Bermuda?"

"I don't want anything," I said. "I just want to know if I'm the second person to hit you with this."

"The first," he said flatly. "And I hope the last. Only one man knows about that stretch in stir. And the reason for it. Only one out here, anyway."

"His name would help me make up my mind."

Barr didn't hesitate long. "Gideon Cheim," he said.

Which was true. Barr had been doing extra roles when Cheim spotted him, saw something in the man, magnetism, presence, sex appeal, something—nobody ever claimed Cheim couldn't pick them—and gave him his start.

"I suppose you're going to spill it around town," Barr said.

"Nope. If it's true nobody's mentioned this to you lately, tried to sell you the tale, asked you to gag his mouth with money, you won't hear any more from me."

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"Blackmail?" he said. "No, pal. I told you, it's been quiet for seven years. Except for you." He shook his head, hair waving gently. "If you're not after something, why knock me down with this?"

"I was after something. I wanted to know if anybody else had stuck hooks in you. I got what I wanted. So—forget it. I'll see you at the movies."

He'd been getting his color back, and now relief made him look human again. "You're really just going to drop it, huh? Keep it quiet? You're not on my back?"

"That's right. But it still might happen. Not from my end. From somebody else. Maybe." I got a card out of my wallet. "If it does, get in touch with me, because that's the guy I'm after."

He looked at the card. "Scott—sure. Yeah, now I get it." He looked me over, looked at my dandy clothes. "I thought you were an actor. Just off the set. I figured you must be an actor."

Then he dropped it, shrugged, took a deep breath and whooshed the air out between his lips. "Hey, look, I don't just pop these guys for the hell of it, understand? But some of these creeps want to be like the guy shot Jesse James. Maybe they got a babe with 'em, want to show off so they can make out like a hero home for the wars. I'm supposed to close my eyes and hold my kisser out for them?"

I knew what he meant. He had a valid point. But other stars had the same problem. It was generally Warren Barr, however, who solved it the hard way. Maybe he wanted to prove he was really six feet tall. Maybe he liked popping guys. Maybe anything.

I didn't tell him that, though. I merely said, "Could be, But you're not the sweetest darling in the whole world, are you?"

He grinned. "Well—not in the whole world."

8

MAYBE WARREN BARR wasn't the sweetest darling in the world, but Bobby Prin, surely, was one of the sweetest. He was, at least to me, two hundred pounds of icky-goo. Of medium height, his outlines softly rounded, he had a round pink face, a round nose and surprised round eyes, and the expression of Cupid getting goosed.

A surprisingly strong, deep, and masculine voice came out of his almost womanly chest. There wasn't much warmth in it, but it was a trained voice, and I remembered reading a story that he'd once sung in a choir.

I was hearing the voice now.

He wasn't speaking to me, though. Not yet. I'd found him at CLAM headquarter, the six-story building which he owned, wherein were the editorial and other offices, the printing presses, mimeograph machines and TV-radio

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room, and the large ground floor auditorium of his "Citizen's League for the Advancement of Morality."

He was on stage, at the lectern, speaking, and his fine, cool, righteous voice poured from several speakers upon the several hundred men and women, mostly women, seated before him. His voice poured over them like cold syrup on yesterday's pancakes—over them, and over me too.

". . . this legislation is now in committee," he said, "and you will be pleased to learn that I am informed it will soon be voted out. As you know, I personally appeared at the state capitol and testified during the public hearings, and I have every reason to hope this bill will become law during this session of the legislature."

Prin inclined his head until the applause died down.

"But keep working, my friends," he continued. "Work, speak, write—write your senators and congressmen, your newspapers. Do not flag in your efforts, now that victory is near. If you do not falter, I promise you, we together will win another victory over the forces for filth, another victory for Decency!"

More applause. The head bowed again.

I suppose it was one of the curses I had to bear, but I happened to know the bill he was talking about provided for fine and/or imprisonment for anybody convicted of selling, in California, magazines in which appeared "obscene" photographs of nude tomatoes.

I do not refer to gardening magazines, though it was possible that with continued success Prin might get started on obscene carrots and bananas, onions and beets. But not yet; this bill would merely mean the elimination, from California at least, of mags in which appeared photos of nubile females, nude—which, of course, would mean no more *Whoopee!* Perhaps no more of plenty, since I also knew there was no definition of "obscene" in the bill.

I'd started moving when the applause began, so when Bobby Prin waddled off stage and down the wooden stairs to the hallway near his office, I was there waiting for him.

"Mr. Prin?" I said.

He was preoccupied, smiling gently, perhaps still listening to the applause. He glanced at me, let the round eyes rest with instant interest on my face.

"May I have a minute or two of your time, Mr. Prin?" I asked pleasantly.

"Why, of course. I am always availab—"

He cut it off in the middle of a word. It was as though a guillotine blade fell across the back of his tongue. He had one foot on the last step, the other below it on the

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hallway floor, and he stopped, just like that.

Only for a second or two. Then he brought the other foot down. Right away, just like that, he was afraid of me.

Why the hell? I thought. But then—not all at once, but little by little—I got it.

He was looking me up and down, at my clothes, my face. Those damned clothes, I thought. I'd almost forgotten the get-up I was wearing. But in a way, I was slowly realizing, the fact that I was wearing them had told me a little more about each of the people I'd talked to today.

Gladys Jellicoe had merely eyed me with ill-concealed disapproval and growing doubt, but had made no comment, possibly because to have done so would have been in "bad taste." Norm Lawson was keen-brained and sharp-eyed, and wouldn't have missed a thing; but he'd not commented, either. Sylvia had actually liked my dashing garb, or so she'd said. Gideon Cheim was too much wrapped up in Gideon Cheim; I really don't think he'd noticed.

And Barr, immersed in the make-believe of Hollywood, had assumed I was an actor making a picture, possibly a circus picture. But when he'd learned I wasn't he had simply shrugged it off.

To each his own. So what?

Prin had his own reaction, too. He knew that nobody dressed like this, especially a guy who looked like me, would be a follower of Bobby Prin. I imagine I looked to him like a mad bull loose in his arena, and I didn't think he was a man who could be comfortable except with his own kind.

That was all right. I didn't want him comfortable. So when he recovered his poise and asked me, "How can I be of help, sir?" I said, "Well, I'm not a member of CLAM, but I was quite interested in what you had to say."

"Mmm—in what way?"

"Well, we're all for decency. But I don't think you went far enough, Mr. Prin. First things first, right? Obscene pictures are bad enough, but what about men who perform lewd acts—" He was already starting to fold, that fast. "—exposing themselves and all that . . ." Just folding in on himself, seeming to get smaller. "—indecent exposure, we can call it, especially in the presence of children—small, decent children."

He'd had it. Without a tan, he looked even worse than Warren Barr had. But he didn't sit down, or fall down. He merely moistened his lips, then said to me, "Let's go into my office."

I followed him down the hall.

Inside, he shut the door, waddled to his desk and sat down, opened a drawer and took out what looked like a large black-bound ledger. Actually, it was a checkbook.

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"Are you certain of your facts, Mr.—what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't tell you."

"Yes, I see."

He hadn't really expected me to tell him, apparently. But I said, "It's Shell Scott."

That surprised him. That I'd told him my name, at least. Maybe he knew the name. Hell, he probably had a thick file on me.

I went on, "The facts are these, Mr. Prin," and laid them out. Two arrests for what I had just referred to as "indecent exposure." In the presence of children. Once near a schoolyard. Once at a playground.

"I was never convicted, you know," he said.

"How about the times you weren't even arrested?"

He didn't want to pursue that. "I suppose you want money. I have no cash in the office. A check?"

I figured he was my boy. But I went through the rest of it. "First, you tell me something, Prin. How long since the last payoff?"

"I don't see what difference—"

"Mister, it makes a difference to me." I stepped toward the desk.

He threw both pudgy hands up in front of his face, as if he expected me to leap through the air and land on top of him. "Wait. I'll tell you. I just didn't understand why—why that would be of interest to you. I didn't—"

"Don't worry about why. Just tell me when was the last time."

"January sixteenth, last year."

I blinked. "Last year? Not lately? I mean, how about in the past few days or so."

He was not only frightened, and somewhat ill, but also puzzled now.

"No," he said. "Last year." He swallowed, tried to smile, and finally said, "Do you think I'd forget?"

I didn't say anything for a moment. Then I asked him a few more questions, probed a bit. No help. Not the kind I was after, anyway. He had enough influence, and money, to keep the two "lewd conduct" arrests out of the papers, and maybe even off the blotter. I wasn't concerned about that, because I didn't have to dig up legal proof. As far as Prin was concerned, even half proof would raise havoc in his flock. He was willing to pay in order to avoid that. Not too much, but anything within reason.

"Live and let live," he said to me; but I couldn't quite find it funny enough to laugh at.

"How much do you want?" he asked me.

"You damn fool, I don't want any money. I wanted to know if anybody had tried to blackmail you recently."

"I don't understand."

I cut it off. If I'd told him all I felt like telling him I wouldn't

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have gotten out of the joint until midnight.

I gave him my card, told him to call me if approached, the same thing I'd told Barr. Then I went to the door and opened it, stepped out into the hall.

Before closing it I looked back at Robert Victor Caesar Prin.

Sure, hundreds of women, and men, listened to him, followed him, did what he told them. But he was only the symbol. He was what they wanted, what they needed. Maybe he was, in part, what they'd made him. And even if legal proof of his crimes could still be found, which was more than a bit doubtful, it didn't make much difference. The courts would probably warn him to be good henceforth, and let him go. He hadn't killed anybody yet. Not, at least, so far as I knew.

So all I said was, "Good afternoon, Mr. Prin."

As I went out, the good citizens were still leaving, filing from the auditorium. On their way home now, to husbands, wives, children; to the pencil and paper, maybe to other meetings. The men and women, mostly women, the majority of them dry-looking, as if the juice had been sucked out of them, buzzed and chattered. Their faces were flushed, eyes bright, voices shrill.

Many of them looked at me. A few with disinterest, some with revulsion, others with—there was no

mistaking it—anger. I was *glad* I'd goofed and worn my pukey clothes. Lots of looks I got, yes, lots of them. But not one of those dears smiled at me. Not one.

9

THE SKY looked as if oil had been poured on it and lighted by the time I rang the bell at Zena Tabur's door. She was between pictures, and home; home being a small trim house centered in a beautiful two acres in the valley.

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She opened the door and glanced at the magnificent sunset, then looked at me. And looked. "Holy mowkerel," she said in her weirdly kookie but ear-pleasing accent. "You look—" she pointed at the sky—"like you came down from there."

I shook my head wearily. It had been quite a day. Fun's fun, but it was beginning to wear on me. Though, with all those flaming colors in the sky reflected all around the landscape and on me, I suppose I did look a bit like Father Nature, or a Caribbean cruise.

"You're Zena Tabur, I presume? Actually, there isn't any doubt in my—"

"She is me," Zena said.

She kind of buzzed all her S's, letting her lips stiffen and curl a bit, not at all unattractively. When she said, "She is me," it came out, "Zzhee izz me."

Her head didn't even come up to the top of my shoulder, but it was a head a guy would like to keep in that general area for a long time. Those slanted eyes were even darker and bigger and wilder than they looked on the screen, and Bobby Prin could have held a whole meeting about her lips.

Sometimes she wore that thick black hair up, in sworls on the top of her head, but it was down now, falling forward over her shoulder and covering one breast. She was wearing jeweled sandals, white stretch pants, and a man's shirt, and she looked as much like a man as I look like Little Bo Peep.

"How do you do, Miss Tabur," I said. "My name is Shell Scott."

"I'll bet you wear green zhorts. What do you zay you are? Zhell Zcott?"

"That's close enough. I'd like to talk to you, Miss Tabur. May I come inside?"

"Well. Juz' zo you don' drip on the carpet."

We went inside. The place looked like a hunk of the Far East, with some Middle East and Mars mixed in. Hanging lamps made out of brass with triangular and oddly-shaped holes cut in the metal. A huge splashy abstract painting on the wall. Ancient-looking idols, figures with fantastic heads and others with half a dozen arms. Low ceiling, thick, long-napped carpet in an odd shade, like blue with frost on it.

We sat on a divan about sixteen feet long, low, filled with soft down I sank deep into. In front of the divan was a dark, carved table, beyond it two square hassock-like affairs, shocking-pink on brass rollers.

This was a place it would take a while to get used to. And it would be fun. But the sun was sinking in the West, and I was a long way from home. Any way you looked at it.

So I simply laid it out for her, the way I'd got it from Cheim.

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Hard and fast, no mincing of words. And this one, too, was another surprise for me.

When I got through she said, "Yeah, I zhot him. Zo?"

"You mean—aren't you all shook up?"

"Zhook up for what?"

"Suppose I was about to blackmail you right now. Yeah, suppose that. How about that? Doesn't that grab you—"

"Ha-hooey," she laughed. "Go ahead. Try it. I'll kick you in the —how?"

"Miss Tabur, dammit. You were saying—just exactly what were you saying?"

"I don' know. But you were talking about blackmail."

"That's right. Okay. I'm blackmailing you."

"The hell you are. How you gonna blackmail me?"

"Well, if you don't want to be blackmailed I guess I can't *force* you. But, well, look. You're some kind of foreigner, aren't you? Maybe I'd better explain. Subject: Blackmail. I get something on you, see? That is, I find out something about you that you want kept a big secret. Then I threaten to tell people—lots of them, everybody—about your dark, criminal secret, unless you pay me gobs of money. That's how I make my living."

"You must hate yourself."

"I don't mean I really do it. I'm a detective. I don't *really* do it. I—ah, the hell with it."

"What's the big zecret you got on me?"

"You shot your husband. You killed him."

"Yeah, I zhot him. Zo?"

I stood up. "Good-by, Miss Tabur."

"Wait a minute. You think it's a zecret I zhot him? That I want it a zecret?"

"Of course. Why else would I be here?"

"Ha-hooey, go on and do it. Print it, hand it out. Go on television. Tattoo it on your head and go around zaying hey look, read my head."

"But—"

"You look like you don' feel good. Let me ask you, what else do you know about what I did to my husband?"

"I don't know anything about that," I said. "Only about your shooting him."

"Exactly how did I do it?" she said.

"All I know is you shot him. Killed him. There were police, scandal, crime, murder, a big mess. I suppose people covered up for you, bribery, that sort of thing, powerful friends—"

"I better tell you what I did to my husband."

"I don't want to pry, Miss Tabur. All I'm concerned about is the shooting."

"That's what I'm gonna tell you. He was a zlob. I am plenty young when I married him." She paused,

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tossed a slant-eyed look at me. "I'm ztill plenty young."

"Yeah."

"He used to get drunk. He beat me. Couple times he put a gun at me but didn't zhoot. One night he went like he was crazy and did zhoot at me. Mizzed me. I had a little gun of my own by then. In a drawer. I ran and got it. He zhot at me again. Mizzed me again. Zo I zhot him. Got him right in between the ears."

"Eyes?"

"Ears."

"Anyhow, you got him."

"I got him."

"Good for you."

"That's what I think."

"That's all there was to it, huh?"

"It was enough, I thought. Thought it was plenty."

"Yeah, of course. I mean, nobody could blackmail you with that information?"

"What do you think? How'd you do?"

"That's a pretty good answer. Nobody's tried to blackmail you?"

"Only you. If they're all like you, they can try it any day."

"I've been on some funny cases," I said. "But this one's a pip. I don't really know one bean about what's going on, now I look at it. It's a pip. Often I have them all wrapped up by this time."

"You're pretty good, huh?"

"Well—I'm not really sure any more. They just seem to work out."

"You look like you could do it."

"Do what?"

"The blackmail. For one thing."

"What's the other thing?"

"Let'z ztick to the blackmail." She eyed me a while. "Maybe not. You got to go zomewhere I mean, like in the next hour?"

"I probably should. Only I don't quite know where it would be. I've just finished carrying out all my clever plans—"

Zena said, "Then ztay with me here for a while. We'll get acquainted."

"Well . . ."

"I think I like you. I'm not zure yet. I got to figure it out."

"How do you do that?"

"I got a way."

Hmm, I thought. "Mind if I use your phone?"

"Go ahead."

"I want to call my office. As long as I can't think of anything constructive to do, I won't feel guilty staying here."

"How do you know yet?"

"But I'd better check and see if anything's come up at the office. Where's the phone?"

"Under the helmet." She pointed.

It wasn't just a helmet. It was a metal helmet with a head under it. With a face like the guy was realizing his head had just been chopped off. I approached it gingerly.

"Chinese," she said. "Doesn't look like much fun, does he?"

"What is it, a pay phone? You

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drop dimes in his mouth or something?"

"Just lift it off. It's free. If the guilt bothers you, you can leave a dime in the mailbox if you leave."

I looked around. "When?"

"That's up to you, I think."

Hmm, I thought. I lifted the helmet and head off, found the phone. Hazel was still at the switchboard, and often was when several tenants were still in their offices. She told me there'd been nothing new, no calls.

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. "Okay if I leave this number?"

Zena nodded and I gave it to Hazel, said she could reach me here during the next few minutes at least. If I left and wasn't near the car I'd call her back.

Then I hung up, put the helmet and head back on the phone, thinking. And I couldn't think of anything better equipped to take my mind off problems than Zena.

Maybe I'd been wrong about a lot of things; but I was right about that.

The delightful accent of Zena Tabur was like hot breath in your ear, a bit difficult to decipher at first, but in these last minutes her message had become clearer and clearer.

So when she said, "Gizz me, Zhell, gizz me," I knew exactly what she meant.

So what the hell, I gizzed her.

The phone rang and I leaped to within an inch of the ceiling. It was a clanging like gongs in a wash barrel.

"What was that?" I said.

"It's the phone in the head," Zena said.

"You've got one in there, too?"

She walked to the helmet, saying, "I zleep good, pretty zound. Zo I need a loud bell. That's why it's in the head. Makes a racket, didn't it?"

She answered the phone, handed it to me. It was Gideon Cheim. He'd called the office and Hazel had given him this number.

"You've got to come out here," Cheim bellowed. "Immediately."

"What's up?"

"I can't tell you, not on the phone. It's terrible. I'll tell you when you get here. And hurry!"

"Calm down, Mr. Cheim. You're not very damn far past that operation, you know. Just take it easy. I'm on my way."

He had not calmed down much while I'd been driving to the Weston-Macey. He hadn't actually leaped into the middle of the room, but a pillow was on the floor and the bedclothes were pulled around like a wrestling match.

As I walked in he gave the covers another vigorous yank.

"Take it *easy*," I said. "No matter what's coming off, you're not dead yet. Keep that up, though, and you might be. What's happened?"

"I'm being blackmailed!"

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"You?"

"Me. I. Gideon Cheim."

"I'll be damned," I said. "I talked to everybody else, but not even my old subconscious tipped me to—What do you mean, blackmailed? By whom? How?"

"Jellicoe. It has to be Tom Jellicoe. The lousy—"

"Hold it. Slow down. You had me come out here like an Indianapolis daredevil. Now tell it *my* way." I waited till he'd opened his mouth and shut it, then said, "Slow and easy. From the beginning."

"I received a phone call. Here. Just before I called you. Tom Jellicoe—"

"Hold it again. Are you positive it was Jellicoe? Did he admit it?"

"No, of course not. The voice was muffled, faint, but it sounded like him. Who else would it be?"

"The only person I'm sure it wasn't is Zena."

"Who?"

"Never mind. What about the call? What did he have to blackmail you with? And what does he want?"

"He wants a hundred thousand dollars. He's going to phone again at exactly ten and tell me how to handle transfer of the money. Like a damn kidnaping. That's another reason I think it was Tom. That —"

"Don't tell me what you think. Tell me what happened."

"He knew—knows—several things, I—that mustn't be made public. The kind of things that—well, if I have to I'll pay him the money." He swore. "And keep paying. Unless you can get the son off my back."

"How did he find out these horrible items about you, Mr. Cheim?"

"Oh, hell, it had to be from the manuscript. That's another reason it must be Tom. He's the one—"

"The manuscript 'I'? Your autobiography? You mean things you put in there yourself?"

"Yes, dammit. Some of the things I wanted in there wouldn't have been believed unless my part was told, too."

"So you put the stuff in there that the guy's using to blackmail you with?"

"Yes."

"That's very funny. But it wasn't very bright."

"You idiot, the manuscript wasn't supposed to be published until I was dead!" He sort of gasped then and put a hand over his heart.

"You better watch it," I said.

"I had to include things about me, things I don't want known, so people would know the rest of it was true."

"The things about other people, you mean. Guys you wanted to swing back at."

"Yes, other people."

"Gals you wanted to ruin. Guys you wanted to stick, to stab. People you wanted to claw, even if

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you had to reach out from the grave to do it."

He didn't say anything. But it looked as if those red flames were flickering deep in his black eyes again.

"Brother," I said, "you really are a sweet one. Being close to death makes a guy different, right? Makes him want to take back all the mean things he ever said. Or wrote. Makes him sweeter than—okay, tell me exactly what was said."

"That's it. All of it. A hundred thousand dollars in cash. I'll be told by phone how to deliver it."

"The guy must be nuts to think you can scrape together a hundred G's at this hour."

"That's no problem. There's that much in my home. I could get it from two or three other sources. The money's not the point. I've got to get back that manuscript. You've got to get it back."

I said. "I'll take the case."

He pushed his lips out. "If you do, if you succeed in getting back the manuscript before the information about me can be publicized, if you apprehend the blackmailer, get him, Tom or whoever, *get him*—I'll pay you anything. Anything at all."

"Don't go overboard."

"Anything at all! Whatever you ask."

"It's a deal. Now, let's find out what else we can, if anything. Describe the voice—"

"I've told you it was that Tom Jellicoe—"

"Shut up!" I yelled at him.

He clammed.

"Not only am I tired of your yelling at me—tired of you, for that matter, Cheim—but get those blasted jump-to-conclusions ideas out of your head. Your caller wasn't Tom Jellicoe."

"It was. It had to be."

"Tom Jellicoe is dead."

There was a long silence this time.

Then, "Are you sure? Have you —seen his body?"

I shook my head. "No. And I'm not absolutely sure. But Jellicoe wouldn't be blackmailing you. He knows you too well. He's dead. If I'm wrong I'll push a peanut from here to Glendale with my nose."

"Then—who?"

"If you'll stop trying to tell me my business, maybe we'll get somewhere. I was working for somebody else, but I can't help that client now. That part's finished. I'm working for you now. So just take it from me—Jellicoe's dead. Killed, murdered. You got it? I don't know how: shot, stabbed, strangled, clubbed, just dead. Digest that, Cheim. Now, could you recognize the voice? Anybody you know? Any special thing about it that might help identify it?"

He shook his head. "No." The flesh of his face seemed to sag a

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bit more. "I thought it had to be Tom. It was just a voice. Muffled, faint. I don't have any idea who it was."

"Could it have been a woman?"

"A woman? How could it—" He stopped again, looking rather bewildered. "I don't know. I really don't know."

He was a big help.

"What are you going to do?"

I didn't answer him. I was thinking, or trying to. Cheim didn't help any with his constant bellowing.

"Well," he half-shouted. "Do something. Do you think you can get the manuscript? Get the man? Do you?"

"I don't know. Let me think for a minute."

I walked over to the window, opened it, leaned on the sill and stuck my head out in the night air. The breeze was a little cooler now. I filled my lungs with the coolness, closed my eyes.

Something was stuck up there in my head. Maybe if I got away from Cheim. I thought about Sylvia for a while. And Zena. *Gizz me, Zhell.* Yes, it helps to get your mind off the problems. Even a brain in the shape of mine sometimes works nicely after a rest like that. But I didn't feel very happy about it.

I closed the window, walked back to the bed.

Cheim glared at me. "Well?"

"Yeah," I said.

9

I WAS ON the Pasadena Freeway inbound, halfway back to downtown L.A., when I pulled the phone from under the dash and called Hazel.

"I was just trying to get you, Shell," she said.

"What's up?"

"Sam wants to talk to you. He didn't tell me what about. Asked that you call him immediately."

Sam is my buddy, Phil Samson, Captain of Central Homicide. I'd spoken to him earlier today when trying to get a line of Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe.

"Thanks, I'll give him a ring. I'm practically there."

"Shell?"

"Yeah."

"I called that other number you gave me. And you weren't there."

"No kidding."

"But a girl answered."

"No kidding."

"She said she'd been asleep for half an hour, that I woke her up. And then when I asked for you, she said you'd just left, half an hour before." A pause. "Isn't that interesting?"

"Fascinating."

"What did you do, bore her into unconsciousness?"

"Not exactly." I hung up, and called Samson in his office at the Police Building downtown.

"Shell," I said. "What's up, Sam?"

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"You were asking about this Jellicoe."

"Right."

"Hollywood boys got him."

"Got him? How is he?"

"Not so good. He's dead."

"That's what I thought. For a minute you had me wondering. Where was he found? They bring him in?"

"No, still out there. Only found him a few minutes ago. Old man taking a short-cut home almost stepped on the body."

"What've you got on it, Sam?"

"That's about the size of it so far. From this end, anyway. You going out there?"

I looked at my watch. "Yeah. I've got time.

He gave me the location, and added, "One thing, we know what killed him. He was shot. Twice in the heart."

"About four days ago, I'll bet."

"Is that so? Why don't you join the department, Shell? So the rest of us could retire."

"I just hate the thought of you nagging your wife, Sam. Otherwise, in the interests of justice, and decency, I—"

He hung up.

The teams were almost finished when I got there—pictures taken, measurements made, lab boys packing up their equipment. I talked to a few of the men I knew, jawed with a lab man, then took a look at the body. I got an okay to examine it, so I took my last—and

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first, actually—look at Thomas Jefferson Jellicoe.

I wondered what he'd looked like when alive. Right now he resembled the four-by-five photo I'd got from Mrs. Jellicoe last week. This morning? It seemed like last week. But that's what he looked like, in death as in life. It made me feel a little sad, somehow.

Thomas had been dead, roughly, for three or four days. They'd post him down at the morgue and come closer, but that was close enough for me. I looked him over, checked his coat and shirt, the holes in his chest. Two little slugs still in him, down at the bottom of those holes, like metal worms in a piece of meat now that they'd eaten the life out of him.

I got up, brushed off the knee of my trousers, walked over and spoke to a lieutenant I knew.

"Hi, Shell," he said. "Find anything?"

"Same thing you did, probably. You notice those entry wounds?"

He nodded.

"And the holes in his coat?"

He nodded again. "Holes in his coat don't match the ones in him. Damn near down at his belly. Guy had his hands stretched way over his head when he was shot."

"Couldn't very well call it an accident, could you?"

He yawned. "Not very."

I looked at my watch. "Well, I've got to go. See you."

"See you," he said.

I WAITED until Lawson hung up the receiver and started to step out the door of the pay phone booth on La Cienega. Then I stepped in front of him, not too close, but blocking his way.

"Hi, Norm," I said. "What'd he say?"

He didn't make a slip and spill anything he shouldn't have. But it shocked him enough that he couldn't say anything. And that, of course, was almost as bad as if he'd spilled wrong words.

It even took him a long time to say, "Who? What'd who say?"

"Gideon. Gideon Cheim. You know, you did it fast. Twenty seconds." I grinned. "I timed you."

"What the hell is this, Shell?" He grinned and started to move toward me. I took the gun out of my pocket.

"Don't, Norm," I said. "You can believe it or not, but I feel bad enough about this as it is."

I did. The big, handsome sonofagun. I think we could have been friends except for a couple of things. Like two slugs in Jellicoe's chest.

"And don't think I won't drill you if you get fancy, Norm. I will. But not if you keep it friendly. It won't be like your job on Jellicoe."

"I don't know what you mean." He was still barely past the open phone booth door, light spilling out behind him. "Has Tom been found?"

"I mean I won't shoot you when

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you've got your hands stretched over your head."

That stuck him a little. So I stuck him some more.

"You dumb bastard, you're a lawyer. But you fixed it so it's cold, cold blood. Premeditated. Murder one. You can't even say he jumped you. How? Jumped you with his hands eight feet in the air?"

He eased forward, just a little, onto the balls of his feet. He was going one way or another in a second, because he knew I had him. I didn't say anything, but I thumbed back the Colt's hammer. I didn't want to shoot him. But I would.

Finally he let the held breath out of his massive chest in a big sigh, leaned back against the side of the booth and grinned.

"You bastard," he said.

"Thanks," I said.

He knew what I meant. His eyes dropped to the gun in my hand, then up to my face.

"Speaking as a lawyer—the hell with that," he said. "No admissions. But how did you happen to come across me here? I didn't even know in advance I was going to use this pay phone. To call the lovely girl I just phoned, of course."

"Of course. I didn't know, either, naturally. I followed you here from your home."

"The house? How the hell? It could have been a dozen guys—"

"Suppose it could have been. I knew one of them was going to make a call at ten sharp. All I'd have to do is have the cops watch all dozen. The one who phoned at ten sharp gets tagged." I paused. "But I didn't know a dozen guys it could have been. I knew all I needed, though—the one guy it was. So, Norm, I figured I'd come out myself. We've got maybe five, six minutes."

"For what?"

"Police car will be here at ten after. I called in as soon as I knew where we'd be."

"Uh-huh. Just to kill time, then. Why'd you wait at my home for me? Why not somewhere else?"

I grinned. "You don't live somewhere else. But I know what you mean. When I first talked to you, you were not at all surprised when I asked about Jellicoe. Even though you'd killed him. Because ever since then you'd been expecting somebody to talk to you about him. Eventually."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Once he was found, somebody—the police most likely—would want to ask you about the forty-thousand check he gave you the day before he turned up missing. Which you had already cashed before you killed him. You knew there'd be a routine call, at least, so you were ready for that. The check, incidentally, is what first started me thinking about you.

"Thomas had dipped into

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Cheim's money to pay you, then suddenly had to get it back. Natural enough he might think of you, the guy he'd given it to. Besides, he knew there was a tale about you and that dog-track in the manuscript. Where is the little beauty, by the way?"

He grinned but didn't answer. He didn't even say, "What manuscript."

"Another thing—if you want to hear it."

"Love to."

"You told me Jellicoe was guilty of that hit-and-run. I didn't think you would, or should tell me. And we both know now that you wouldn't have if Jellicoe had been alive. Alive, able to cause a stink for you, raise hell because you'd spilled a privileged communication. Hell, you weren't worried about that because you knew he was dead."

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead."

"How much time have we got?"

"You want me to guess or look at my watch?"

"Really on your toes, aren't you?"

"No, just ready to shoot you, friend, if I have to."

He skipped the cigarette.

"You made another mistake, Norm. Just like the hit-and-run bit, only worse. You knew something you shouldn't have known, and it slipped out. Something always does slip out."

"What is it this time?"

"After I told you Jellicoe's suite was searched, you gave me the bit about the forty G's he'd paid you, his apparently having come into a load of money, and that possibly he'd had it in his room. Fine and dandy. If he had got a pile somewhere, ninety-nine times out of a hundred it would have been a check, or deposited in his bank. Guys tossing a room for dough wouldn't be looking for a checkbook, or even a big fat check. What the hell good would it do them?"

"Ah-ha," he said softly.

"Yeah. They'd be looking for cash. Why would you assume Jellicoe had cash unless you *knew* he did? You knew because he'd told you about it."

"You know," he said softly. "I really never thought of that until now."

We didn't have much more to say until the radio car pulled up at the curb.

As the officers got out of the car and started toward us, I said, "Where's the Cheim manuscript, Norm?"

He looked at me, lifted a brow over one eye. Then he glanced at the officers, back at me. "At my house. In the library safe. I didn't think anybody would ever ask me that question."

"Anyone there?"

"I'm a happy bachelor, live alone."

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"Give me the combination, and I'll go get it."

He threw back his head and roared, as he had in his top-floor office earlier today. And then he said, "There ought to be more like you. The world's too nice."

But he gave me the combination.

We walked to the curb. I said, "Want me to ride in with you?"

He turned, his back to the car. "No," he said. Then he grinned. "You've been too good to me already."

I looked at him, shaking my head. "You big, dumb bastard," I said.

10

I SUPPOSE I should have been home in bed. Sleeping. But oddly, even though I'd had no sleep at all last night, my eyelids weren't heavy. I wasn't tired, I was keyed up, wide awake. There were too many thoughts running through my mind.

It wasn't midnight yet. I felt like spending the next couple of hours in a bar. A club somewhere, with music—loud music. But I don't like to drink alone.

And I was already in a phone booth—I'd just finished my last "official" call on the case. Norm was in jail. Mrs. Jellicoe knew her ex-husband was dead. She felt terrible about it. She felt terrible because she wouldn't be getting any more three-thousand-dollar checks. Everything was wrapped up, finished.

I found a dime in my pocket.

Who? I wondered. Sylvia? Zena? And there were a couple of others I'd lately been considering seriously. I pondered the matter for a minute. Well, just so it wasn't Denosia. I dropped in the dime, dialed.

While the phone buzzed I thought of the other call, the one I'd just completed. To Gideon Cheim.

He'd yakked and roared and bellowed at me so much during the first half-minute that I'd had trouble telling him about Norman Lawson, and that Jellicoe had approached him Saturday following Cheim's call, when he'd known Cheim was not dead, not even dying; that they'd arranged to meet that night, where they wouldn't be seen—that had been Jellicoe's idea—and that Lawson had then driven him to a quiet spot, where kids sometimes parked to neck.

Jellicoe needed both manuscript and money, and tried to sell Lawson info from the manuscript. But true to his life, at the end he was still a loser. Norm got the entire story from him, info about the autobiography, the cash, the whole bit. And left Tom Jellicoe there.

Cheim finally simmered down and shut up while I got that told, except for his continual harping on one note: "Where's the manu-

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script? Did you get the manuscript?"

I'd got it. And read most of it. Enough.

I said, "Hold your horses, will you? Everything's fine. Just let me tell it my way, will you?"

"Where's the manuscript?"

I felt like saying, "What manuscript?" But instead I said, "Will you for the love of Mike calm down? I'm telling this as fast as I can."

"Where's the manuscript?"

"I've got it."

"Where's—what?"

"It's right here. Under my arm this very minute. All safe and snug. I've got it."

"Thank God," he said.

"About that, Mr. Cheim. You'll recall you told me I could name my fee. Right?"

Silence. But then, "Yes. I'm a man of my word, Mr. Scott."

"Fine."

"How much do you want?" he asked.

"Not much. You said 'anything.' I think it's only fair. I want the manuscript. So I can burn it."

There were a lot of funny noises. A great clatter in my ear, and a crash. Then some hubbub, sound of shoes squeaking. I guess he'd dropped the phone. Somebody picked it up.

"Hello, hello?"

"Hello," I said. "What's going on? Where'd Mr. Cheim go?"

"He—oh, he . . . I don't know where he went." She was all excited. New nurse, I guessed. "He just dropped dead."

I didn't say anything.

For a while some more noises came out of the phone, then I hung up.

And that is why you have not read, and will not read, "I," the autobiography of Gideon Cheim.

It was lost to the world. Lost forever.

Thus was I thinking. And then, as the expected feminine voice said, "Hello-o?" musically against my ear, I thought: So who needs it?

ANOTHER SHELL SCOTT SHORT NOVEL NEXT ISSUE

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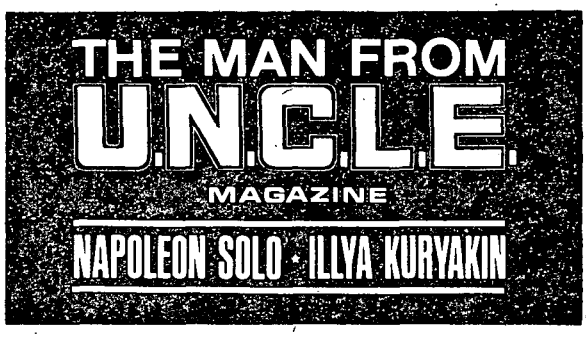

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Murder rode the backstretch and Death held the winning ticket, as a tinhorn learned the cost of welching on a gangland payoff

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Death Wins the Twin Double

by DAVID A. HELLER

"THEY'RE at the starting gate . . . They're off!"

The excited screams and shouts of twenty thousand racing fans split the air. The eighth race at Appalachia Downs was underway.

To the casual turf fan, the eighth at Appalachia was just an ordinary claiming race. Nine very ordinary horses were running a short six furlongs for a small stake of $2,400. By the terms of the race, none of the nine nags had won a race in the past thirty days.

To the casual eye, it was simply an unimportant race at an unimportant track. Appalachia Downs was hardly significant in the American racing picture, simply a run-of-the mill track operating just inside the West Virginia state line—as near as possible to the big crowds who came from Washington and Baltimore, yet still inside West Virginia, to take advantage of the lax West Virginia laws, which permit unlimited racing and are not as strict in other ways as the racing laws of Maryland and Virginia.

The field of nine horses moved into the backstretch, then rounded the far turn. The odds-on favorite, *Speedy Boy*, led by a length and a half. The handicappers had installed *Speedy Boy* as a 5-2 favorite to outrun the nondescript field.

"C'mon, *Speedy Boy!*"

The grandstand bettors were happy. It had been a day of upsets. The $2 players were elated to see a favorite about to romp home.

In the glass-enclosed, air-conditioned clubhouse, three men sitting at a table and toying with drinks were less enthusiastic. The three men were oddly-assorted, not the kind of trio you would expect to see sitting at the same table.

One, dark-haired, with dark-

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bronze skin and snapping black eyes, was early thirtyish. His dark hair was combed back and he affected a thin mustache. His clothes were expensive, fashion-plate variety. The man was a minor official in an unimportant embassy in Washington, D.C. In his pocket was a grey $50 win ticket on a 30-1 long shot in the eighth race, *King Freddie*. He was beside himself with excitement and kept shouting in a Spanish-flavored accent for *King Freddie* to win.

The second man impressively tall, was moon-faced, double-chinned and heavy-set. Fiftyish, his silver hair was thinning atop a massive head. His name was Lawrence J. Young and he was a Washington attorney well known in political circles. Despite his obesity, his lined face and sagging chins, Attorney Young possessed an impressive mien. A glance told you he was a man used to handling large affairs.

Attorney Young's reputation, if the truth were known, was less savory. He had important underworld connections and was more active as an influence peddler, fixer and lobbyist than in the courtroom. But Attorney Young, unlike Carlos Garcinda, the Latin-American diplomat, did not root for *King Freddie,* although he held a grey win ticket ten times larger—$500—on the long shot. He betrayed his anxiety only by his perspiring face.

The third man was fortyish and small and had a faintly menacing look that spelled gangster no matter how hard he tried to conceal it. Beady, coldly-glittering dark eyes. A pitted, sallow face. He wore a conservative black business suit and, if you didn't look too close, you might have mistaken him for an undertaker's assistant. The slightly-built man's name was Joe Cremona and he was a not quite top rank official in the Cosa Nostra, the national crime syndicate. Outwardly, Cremona was the least excited of all, though he had the most at stake.

Outwardly, Cremona's cold, hard, glittering eyes betrayed no excitement. Cremona did not cheer. Except for taut lines around his thin lips and the nervous tightening of his fingers around his glass, the casual observer might not have suspected that Cremona had more than a passing interest in which horse won the eighth race at Appalachia Downs.

That would have been a mistake. In Cremona's breast pocket were five small green tickets for the twin daily double at Appalachia Downs. In a day of long shots and upsets, Cremona had, almost amazingly, correctly picked the winners of the fifth, sixth and seventh races. If the cold-eyed man's selection in the eighth race, *King Freddie,* came home, each of the $2 tickets would be worth near thirty thousand dollars.

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The metallic voice on the track's public address system described the running:

"They're rounding the near turn with *Speedy Boy* ahead by two lengths. *Battle Oak* is second with *King Freddie* coming fast on the outside—"

The public address system was virtually drowned out in a bedlam of noise.

"It's *King Freddie* coming up very fast—"

Seconds later, it was all over. A massive chorus of disappointed groans told the story.

King Freddie, an unknown field horse who had never before finished in the money in any race, suddenly turned on a dazzling burst of speed. With the jockey furiously flailing his sweating flanks, the dark gelding overtook the heavy favorite, *Speedy Boy,* like Whirlaway running away from a plow horse. A third of the way down the stretch the two horses were even.

Then the jet-propelled *King Freddie* outran the favorite to pass the finish line five lengths ahead and going away.

A moan of disappointment escaped most of the twenty thousand race fans, most of whom had just "taken a bath" in the para-mutual wagering.

Joe Cremona, the slightly-built man with the cold, glittering eyes permitted himself the rare luxury of a thin smile. A great deal of hard work over many months had paid off.

The five small green tickets on the twin daily double were good. And the pay-off would be fantastic. In the fifth race, another unknown long shot, *Little Tom,* had unexpectedly romped home. Few except the three men at the table had bet on *Little Tom* and that washed out most of the ticket holders on the twin double. What bettor in his right mind would expect two dogs like *Little Tom* and *King Freddie* to both come home on the same day?

"Congratulations, Senor. You are a magnificent judge of horse flesh."

Carlos Garcinda, the Latin-American diplomat, did not smile as he congratulated Cremona, but the latter detected a hint of sarcasm in the diplomat's voice.

Cremona's dark, cold eyes glittered dangerously. Was Garcinda trying to get cute? If so, Garcinda was getting too smart for his own good. He was only hired help. And pretty cheap hired help at that. Most men have their price, but this petty striped-pants cookie pusher came cheaper than Joe Cremona would've thought a man in his position would've come.

The Cosa Nostra had found uses for Garcinda in the past—small stuff, like smuggling in a little heroin or a few diamonds in his diplomatic pouch, which was not searched by Customs because he

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had diplomatic immunity. This was the first really big deal for Garcinda, and Cremona found himself disliking the man. Cremona's lip curled in contempt, but he said nothing.

As Attorney Larry Young had pointed out, Garcinda, even if he was a fool, had one thing the Cosa Nostra needed today—diplomatic immunity in cashing those winning tickets. Diplomat Garcinda of Costa Brava had been an important part of a cute little operation that had been months in the hatching.

The operation involved two very fast horses, *Little Tom* and *King Freddie,* who had been carefully kept under wraps until the right time at the right place.

It was a real slick operation. Nothing obvious. Nothing a racing commission could point the finger at.

"Don't push 'em. Just let 'em run at their own speed."

In the past, those were the instructions for *Little Tom* and *King Freddie.* The trainer didn't have to say anything incriminating or draw any diagrams for the jockeys. In a dozen races, the whip had been rarely, if ever, used. And, in the past, *Little Tom* and *King Freddie* had loafed along contentedly in the field.

Neither had ever finished in the money. The odds on them had soared.

Then today, at obscure Appalachia Downs, the orders were quietly changed.

"Everything they've got. Everything."

And everything had easily been more than enough to beat the nondescript field in the fifth and eighth races.

It was all smooth and legal. Nothing anybody could prove. Nothing anybody would even suspect. Long shots win horse races every day.

It was a real winner. The syndicate, in off-track betting, would pick up a million dollars on *Little Tom* and *King Freddie.* The five winning twin double tickets were just so much gravy. Another of Larry Young's bright ideas. The whole operation wasn't something you'd try to pull at one of the major tracks, but at obscure Appalachia Downs, it had worked like a charm.

Suddenly, there was a tremendous roar from the crowd. The payoff figure for the winning twin daily double was posted. Thirty thousand, two hundred and fourteen dollars and eighty-five cents for a two-dollar bet! A track record, the public address system blared.

Quietly, Joe Cremona handed the five winning green tickets to Carlos Garcinda, the minor diplomatic official. To make sure that there wouldn't be any chance of losing, he had bought five tickets on every horse in the sixth and seventh races in combination with

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Little Tom and *King Freddie*. That played it safe and made it look better. If anybody came nosing around, it would look good to show that he had a few losing tickets, too.

"Don't try anything cute, Ambassador. Just collect the money and no fancy stuff. Remember, you're gettin' ten thousand. Not bad for an afternoon's work."

Garcinda tried his best to look wounded.

"Have I ever failed you, Senor?"

Joe Cremona grunted. "Be damned sure you don't. Ever."

The diplomat's face was angry, but the smooth smile did not fade.

With a jaunty air, Garcinda accepted the five tickets, picked up a small black satchel, and strolled off to the cashier's office. Cremona and Young followed at a discreet distance.

So far as anyone knew, the winning tickets belonged to Garcinda, not the syndicate.

They did not really expect any trouble. Garcinda was hep. He knew what to expect if he tried anything cute. One false move and he was a dead man. The syndicate was merciless on double-crossers.

The Internal Revenue agent was waiting—as they knew he would be—at the pay-off window. Waiting for the winner of the fabulous twin double tickets to present them to collect his winnings. The tax on one hundred and fifty thousand dollars would be about one hundred and twenty thousand.

But the IRS boy was in for a surprise. He expected that Uncle Sam would be the big winner, but today things would be different. The syndicate had not set up this deal to pay one hundred and twenty thousand dollars to Uncle Whiskers.

Carlos Garcinda simply smiled at the Internal Revenue agent, drew out his diplomatic credentials, and remarked pleasantly that, as an accredited diplomat, he was exempt from U. S. income taxes.

The Internal Revenue agent gulped and promptly smelled a rat. The whole deal had fix written all over it.

"Why don't you call the State Department? We can call them from inside the track office and straighten all this out in a few minutes. You will find my credentials quite in order." Garcinda smiled pleasantly.

Gangster Joe Cremona and Lawyer Lawrence J. Young were not disturbed as, watching from a discreet distance, they saw Garcinda, the Internal Revenue agent, and track officials disappear into an office. They expected that. Naturally, there would be red tape about collecting one hundred and fifty thousand tax free dollars. Uncle Whiskers' boy was smart. He would suspect something phony and he would want to make bloody sure that Garcinda really had diplomatic immunity from U. S. income taxes before he okayed the track paying him off.

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But that was the beauty of the scheme. Carlos really *did* have diplomatic immunity. After the call to the State Department, there'd be nothing the IRS and the track could do but watch the dapper diplomat collect the 150 G's. Afterwards, Garcinda would turn over the money to Cremona and Uncle Sam would've been neatly done out of one hundred and twenty thousand dollars in taxes. Added to the million the syndicate would've made on off-track betting, it would be a real smooth maneuver.

But time passed and Carlos Garcinda did not reappear. An hour. The gangster and the lawyer-lobbyist grew alarmed, then frantic. No Carlos. Later, they found out that he had collected the money, simply walked out the front door and vanished.

THREE months passed. Three very trying months for Joe Cremona. The overlords of the underworld are by nature suspicious men. The thought did not fail to occur to them that Joe Cremona might, in some way, be in cahoots with the disappearing diplomat, Carlos Garcinda. One hundred and fifty thousand missing Cosa Nostra dollars was enough to make them highly displeased.

First to feel the crime syndicate's wrath was the Washington lawyer and influence peddler, Lawrence J. Young. Attorney Young did not inspire confidence in the syndicate which was sitting in judgment on his case.

Young was regarded primarily as a slick, glib talker, paid princely retainers to know the right people and able to get the right things done for the syndicate. True, Young was a man who had his uses. But these uses were primarily dealing with politicians and other slippery types whom the Cosa Nostra high command regarded as basically dishonest. Then too, it was remembered that it was Young who had first brought the corrupt diplomat Carlos Garcinda to the syndicate's attention as a man whose immunity was for sale and who might be useful. And it was the lawyer who had concocted the scheme to beat the government out of its income taxes.

Attorney Young was peremptorily summoned to a meeting with Joe Cremona at the scene of the crime—Appalachia Downs. But the appointment was never kept. En route, the lawyer's car most unfortunately ran off the road and crashed down the side of a West Virginia mountain. When the automobile came to rest, the lawyer was underneath it, quite dead. The coroner's jury ruled it an accident.

For some weeks, Joe Cremona was kept on tenterhooks. But he was, he reflected, lucky. He had a friend at court. A father-in-law, to be exact. A father-in-law who sat on the board of directors of the Cosa Nostra. He would not like to see his daughter a widow.

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At length, Cremona was brusquely summoned into his father-in-law's presence. The conversation was brief and to the point.

"Joe. Get that money back. Fast."

There was no need to add the "or else." It was up to him to produce the missing one hundred G's.

But how? Where had Carlos Garcinda gone? He'd been traced as far as Wheeling, where, it was learned, a man answering his description had taken a plane for Chicago. There the trail ended.

Garcinda wasn't in Costa Brava. The tiny Central American banana republic had been combed from end to end.

Garcinda had simply walked away from his previous life and vanished. His apartment was discreetly entered by syndicate-hired private detectives. Everything was exactly as it was left on the afternoon the missing diplomat left for Appalachia Downs. The private detectives scoured every possible shred of evidence that might give a clue to Garcinda's whereabouts—without the barest lead.

The information they uncovered was not of much help: Garcinda's previous diplomatic appointment had been as second secretary of the Costa Brava mission in Havana. When the Organization of American States lowered the diplomatic boom on Castro, Costa Brava closed its embassy and Garcinda was transferred to Washington.

The vanishing diplomat was known as a bit of a roue. No scandal, but a bachelor playboy who lived high, a regular on the Washington cocktail and social circuit. That took money. And nobody—except, of course, the syndicate—knew where Garcinda got it. His salary certainly wasn't enough.

But nobody had asked any questions. Many in the diplomatic set are rich. It was commonly supposed that Garcinda's family in Costa Brava had money, a story the vanished diplomat had carefully spread.

At first there was plenty of government heat for action on the case. The Costa Brava embassy complained loudly and vocally to the State Department that Garcinda was the victim of "foul play" at

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the hands of "U. S. gangsters" because of his fabulous winnings at the track. Slightly later, when rumors of Garcinda's own gangland connections began to float around, the Costa Brava embassy was only to anxious to wash its hands of the whole affair.

But there is always a link between a man and his past. The more Joe Cremona thought about it, the more a simple idea kept returning to his mind. What was Garcinda's link with the past? A woman?

It was obvious, but Cremona became convinced that, if a clue existed to the missing diplomat's whereabouts, a woman would provide the clue. Garcinda was suave and handsome in an oily sort of way. He was ostensibly rich and he had the flossy manners and the dashing Latin gallantry that some women go for.

Cremona summoned the private detectives to his hotel suite.

"There's got to be a woman who knows something about Garcinda. Find her."

Two days later, one of the operatives returned with important news.

"I think we've hit pay dirt, Mr. Cremona. There *is* a girl. Name's June Woodward." The private detective gave Joe Cremona the address of the girl's Georgetown apartment.

"She's a government secretary or something. She's got some sort of job with the government. I couldn't find out what. She's a good-lookin' blonde. Like a lot of Latins, Garcinda seems to have a weakness for blondes."

"Thank you. Very good. I'll be in touch." Cremona dismissed the private detective. He received the news without emotion, but the icy, dark eyes glittered.

That night, as June Woodward got out of her car, she was terrified to see an evil-looking man awaiting her. He grabbed her wrist, led her from the car.

Before she could move, a rough hand covered her mouth and the razor-sharp edge of a knife was pressed against her throat.

"Don't move. Don't make a sound. If you scream, you're dead! Give me the key to your apartment."

Joe Cremona spoke the words with cold, matter-of-factness.

"Will you keep quiet?"

Trembling, the blonde girl nodded her head. They led her into her street floor apartment. No one saw them.

Cremona motioned to the syndicate thug. The hairy hand was removed from the girl's mouth, but the knife remained menacingly near her throat. Then the thug grasped the girl's left arm and twisted it behind her. She wasn't going to run away.

Cremona pulled down the window shades carefully and searched the blonde girl's face. Her appearance surprised him. Not the type

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he expected at all. The dame was a lady. Refined. Dignified. Not the kind of woman he'd've thought would go for Carlos Garcinda. Still, you never can tell.

Women are funny in their choice of men.

Even in her terror, June Woodward did not cringe. Her clear blue eyes stared straight at Cremona with undisguised contempt. In spite of himself, Cremona was impressed.

"What do you want? How dare you break into my apartment?" June Woodward was a spunky dame all right.

"Relax, little lady. Cooperate and you won't get hurt."

"Just a little thing. I want to know where we can find Carlos Garcinda."

The girl's eyes widened. "I'll never tell you." She almost spat out the words.

Then there was a brief, very pregnant pause as the girl recognized her mistake. Seemingly panic-stricken, she looked at Cremona with horror, realizing that the gangster knew she knew where Garcinda was.

Joe Cremona's thin lips smiled. The cold, dark eyes glittered with satisfaction.

"Tell us where he is, lady. You know—and we're going to find out. Make it easy on yourself."

"No. I won't tell you. Do what you want with me, but I'll never tell you."

The delicate chin was raised defiantly.

"Don't make us do it the hard way. There are easier ways."

From his coat pocket, Joe Cremona drew out a packet of one hundred dollar bills.

"There are five thousand dollars here. Tell us where Garcinda is and it's yours—besides sparing yourself a lot of aches and pains."

"No. I'll never tell you." The girl was defiant and if Joe Cremona could have felt sorry for anybody, he would have felt sorry for her.

They had to slap her around plenty, but, in the end, of course, they got the information.

"Tell us, or I'll have him break your arm."

The muscle man twisted the blonde girl's arm near the breaking point. A little more pressure would do it.

"All right." The girl began to weep softly.

"Where is he?"

"In Key West. I don't know his address. I write to him care of General Delivery." The girl moaned out the words.

"That's good enough. Let her go."

Cremona and his thug left the blonde girl, her cheeks bruised from savage slaps, slumped in a heap on the floor, sobbing.

Key West, Florida, is the southernmost town in the continental United States. In winter, it is a great vacation resort because it is

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the only truly tropical town on the mainland. The last in the chain of jeweled keys that stretch south from the mainland into the Caribbean, it is always warm, even when the tourists in Miami, one hundred sixty miles northeastward, are freezing in some severe cold spell.

Key West is a town with a Cuban flavor. These days its population is swollen with many refugees from Castro's tyranny. It is a tolerant, easy-going community and the Cubans who have fled Castro are assimilated into its life in a way that is not possible in metropolitan Miami. Half of the "conchs," or native Key Westers, have Cuban blood somewhere in their backgrounds anyway.

It was not during the tourist season when Joe Cremona and two of his muscle men landed at Key West International Airport. They found a sleepy tropical town where not much was happening.

It took Cremona and his hoods two days to locate Carlos Garcinda. The fugitive diplomat's disguise was good. He had shaved off the mustache, cut his hair short, and had exchanged the flashy, tailor-made, expensive suits to the blue dungarees and dirty shirt of a common sailor. Posing as a Cuban refugee, Garcinda had taken a job aboard one of the shrimp boats which operate in the Caribbean out of Key West. He lived by himself in a tumble-down, sagging house in the Cuban quarter.

That night, when Carlos Garcinda returned to his shack, he found Joe Cremona and his two hoodlums waiting for him.

One look at the lethal .45 in Cremona's hand—pointing straight at him—and Garcinda's jaw dropped a mile.

"Get the money, Carlos."

Without a word, Garcinda removed two boards from the floor of his kitchen, took out a hidden paper bag and handed it to Cremona.

"Count it." Cremona handed the bag to one of his muscle men.

After a few minutes the hood said, "It's all here."

Cremona turned to the ex-diplomat.

"You're stupid, Carlos. You've played it real stupid. You should've stayed with us. Now you're finished."

Garcinda was terrified. "You can have the money back. I give it back to you. All of it. You do not even have to pay me my ten thousand dollars commission."

That struck Joe Cremona as funny. A very funny thing to say. Generous of Carlos to give back the money after they already had it.

"You're a riot, Carlos. A real riot."

Menace returned to Cremona's voice.

"The only question now, Carlos, is whether we're going to kill you here or use a boat and dump you in the Caribbean. How about that, Carlos? Would you like to be buried

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at sea?" Cremona took a sadistic delight in taunting his victim.

"We've already killed Larry Young, Carlos. You don't think we'd let you get away, do you?"

"Hands up! You're under arrest!"

It was Cremona's turn to stare in astonishment into the barrel of a .45. Two dark-suited men and a blonde girl had silently entered the room.

"We're United States Treasury agents. It is my duty to inform you that you are under arrest on the charges of income tax evasion, violation of the narcotics and customs laws and for the murder of Lawrence J. Young. Anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you."

The dark-suited treasury agent in charge went through his legally-ritualistics spiel.

While the treasury agents covered Cremona, Garcinda and the two syndicate hoodlums, the blonde girl professionally took Cremona's gun out of his hand.

Cremona's cold, glittering eyes stared with hatred at the girl, June Woodward.

"So it's you."

"Yes. I'm an agent of the Treasury. I came for purposes of identification. I specially wanted to be around when they arrested you."

Carlos Garcinda was astonished. "June!"

The blonde girl with the innocent blue eyes glanced at the one-time diplomat with professional distaste.

"The Treasury has been suspicious of you for a long time, Carlos. A narcotics agent passed the word that you might be using your diplomatic pouch to smuggle heroin into the United States."

"Your girl friend put the finger on you, Carlos. She told us you'd been writing to her from Key West."

Garcinda was dumbfounded.

"I never wrote to her. I never wrote to anybody." Turning to June Woodward, Garcinda asked in amazement: "How did you know I was in Key West?"

June Woodward looked at the Treasury agent in charge. He nodded.

"Tell them. It doesn't matter. It might induce them to tell us some things."

The blonde girl's voice was soft.

"Fortunately for you, Carlos, the FBI and the Treasury are a lot better at finding people than your friends are. We knew you'd been in Cuba. It occurred to us that you might pose as a Cuban refugee until the heat died down and it was safe for you to go somewhere else. We tried Miami first and then Key West. Your whereabouts were known to us within a week after you'd disappeared."

"Why didn't you arrest me earlier, then?"

The blonde girl smiled. "On what grounds? On what evidence? Merely disappearing is no crime.

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And, if the money really belonged to you at the time it was paid to you, your diplomatic immunity really did exempt you from paying American income taxes." The blonde girl paused.

"Fortunately, we now know that the money legally belongs to Cremona. And that makes it income tax evasion, not to mention the other charges. Everything you said has been tape-recorded. You've given us the evidence we need in court to convict the lot of you."

Joe Cremona cursed.

"Why did you let us slap you around? In your apartment? Why did we have to get rough to get Carlos' whereabouts out of you?"

June Woodward smiled again. "For realism. I had to play the role of Carlos' girl friend. If I'd just tamely given you his address, which I could have, you'd've been suspicious. By making you force me to tell you, you weren't suspicious. I didn't want you to send somebody else after Carlos. I wanted you to come yourself. The Treasury wanted the evidence on somebody close to the top in the Cosa Nostra."

The blonde girl rubbed her cheeks ruefully. "That was beyond the role of duty, but, seeing you all here like this, I think it's actually worth it."

The dark-suited Treasury agent in charge motioned with his gun. "Time to go."

Then, turning to Joe Cremona the agent added: "I think you might find it a good idea to do some talking—fast. It might help if we were able to tell the judge that you were cooperative."

In the Next Issue:

BLOOD BALLOT

A Thrilling SHELL SCOTT Short Novel

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

Crossing a guy like Joe Blake was like playing Russian roulette with no empty chambers and you first. But they'd given Shell the case and the money was good. So he kept a rendezvous that started with a beautiful girl—and ended in death for two . . .

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PLEASE DON'T DATE THE EASIES

It was a house of the dead, and soon —He shivered. Soon it would claim its own. Soon another would die . . .

by

HARRY WHITTINGTON

THE WAY she sat tense, trying to conceal her rising agitation as she drove into that forsaken, brooding place, made Van shiver. What urgent hidden reason prompted her maneuvering him here?

"You been out here before, Alison?" Van whispered, cautious out of habit, even though they were fifteen miles from King's Bay in her convertible, night-crawling an ill-tended lane that strangled and died in clotted undergrowth. Tangled vine-canopies overwhelmed what might once have been a formal garden. Car headlamps illumined a tree-choked, three-storied Gothic monstrosity, age-blistered, neglect-decayed.

"Many times." Alison's voice pulsed with an odd timbre that increased his uneasiness. Slender, dark, her skin gleamed with a glaze that suddenly seemed unearthly. "It was the Nix home—but no one's lived here in over forty years."

"The golf pro?"

"Yes. It belongs to Nelson Nix's family. But it's not his cup of tea. Excitement, travel, Scotch, an occasional tourney purse, that's Nels."

Van sought a place to turn around. "Not exactly my idea of kicks, either."

Alison touched his wrist. Her fingers chilled him like thin shards of ice. He shivered involuntarily. "Stop the car, Van. Please don't go yet."

Van failed an attempted laugh. "I fell like somebody's breathing down my neck—"

"It's her—"

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"Oh, come on now. You scaring me with a ghost story?"

"Carolyn Nix," Alison said in an abstracted tone. "A great aunt of Nelson's, though he's never talked about her."

Van tightened, remembering whispers he'd heard about Alison France and the men she knew, in the old testament connotation, behind her husband's back. Nelson Nix had been one of the names. One of them—

He cut the engine, both hands gripping the wheel. He'd blitzed in on King's Bay, and on the country club, and on Alison when she answered the prowling glint heating his eyes.

He moved fast, because he was ambition driven, coveting only the best. He was honest with himself; he had less ruth than any man he knew.

He admitted Alison France no longer represented the best, but even her cattiest detractors would concede she was a step up for a man starting where he had.

It began with a martini in the country club lounge; it continued according to Alison's rules. She called him; she said when; he met her in unlikely bars, strange neighborhoods—on roads like this on nights like this.

He played it her way because he had a fierce desire to prowl the homes of the vulnerable rich—homes where Alison could take him. He was twenty-five and in the past seven years of enjoying life on guts, charm and animal cunning, he'd learned that a grateful woman could do more for a man than any other success formula in the world.

Alison told him they had to be careful because Roger was jealous. Van guessed it was some other lover wearing green eyes and horns, because he'd never seen Roger sober long enough to sustain a deranging emotion.

He said nothing, and he made her relish him, returning to him again and again, calling him oftener. He was on his way—

"Three murders," Alison whispered now against his lapel. "That was too much, even for a family as violent as the Nixes. Carolyn died first, mysteriously and horribly.

"For years they insisted they heard her crazy laughter in the night. Always it coincided with a violent death in the region—a highway pile-up, a jealousy murder, something brutal."

"Come on now—"

"People stopped visiting the Nix family out here." Fascinated by her story, Alison didn't hear him. "Then another Nix was killed. The survivors swore they saw Carolyn, in a strange, green light, laughing in that hysterical way, take the dead man by the hand and lead him away into the darkness."

Alison exhaled heavily. "The family moved out then." An old uncle stayed on as caretaker. One night some town hoodlums came

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out to scare him. Insane with fright, he killed one of them with an axe. And then he saw Carolyn come for the dead man, laughing and crooning to him—"

"Alison—"

"They closed the house forever. Forty years ago. Not even kids fool around out here. They say Carolyn still wanders around, coming in raging laughter for those who die violently—"

Van kissed Alison, holding his mouth upon hers until she gave up the ghost story. But he could not shake the feeling she'd left much unsaid.

She shivered, pressing closer. "Isn't this the perfect place, Van?"

Keenly attuned to her by now, he tightened. "It's been swinging so far. But that's not what you've got in mind, is it?"

She held her breath the space of three heartbeats. "Suppose you wanted a place no one ever went, where no one would ever look for you. Can you imagine anything more ideal?"

He felt the irregular speeding of his heart. "You're trying to tell me something."

"You and me, Van. How long am I to go on living with a man who knows I'm alive only to use me for a punching bag, a sounding board for all his petty frustrations! I'm sick of it. I could never dream of being free, not until I met you. Now I don't dream of anything else.

"Think what we could do with Roger's money! I can inherit it, or I can take it. I can't ever get it by divorcing Roger. Not with his vile mind and his father's influence. They'd find people who'd swear to evil lies about me."

Van closed his fingers tightly on her wrist. "If you've any insane notion about killing Roger—"

"Oh, Van, no! What do you think I am? I couldn't—"

"I thought maybe this place had pushed you off the path."

"Why, I could never kill Roger or anyone. But that money—I've earned it these five years with him. Roger has neglected me, humiliated me. He's never considered me his equal, never let me forget it. I hate him. I don't want him dead, but I don't want him divorcing me, cutting me off without a penny."

Van slipped his arm around her, pulled her head over upon him.

She lay against him, unmoving. She whispered, "We could kidnap Roger, Van. Hold him here until his father paid us for his release—and run with the money. A hundred thousand? A quarter of a million? Who'd ever suspect us? Who's ever seen us together? Who'd ever search out here?"

"I'd—have to think about it," Van said.

She nodded. Her voice chilled him. "I want you to, Van. I hope you can't think about anything else, the way it's gotten with me."

He didn't see Alison for a week.

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She called; he let the phone ring until the sound wilted, expired. She found his gaze across the club dining room, he looked away.

She brought Roger over to his small table. Roger carried one Scotch in his hand and at least three down the hatch.

Alison said, "I wanted you to meet Roger. He's not much fun to know, but he's rich. Maybe you can sell him some stocks."

Van invited them to sit down, ordered drinks around. A slender, dark-haired man, Roger ignored Van's proffered hand.

Alison laughed shakily. "Now you know what our marriage is like."

Roger looked along his nose at Van, not really seeing him; then he shifted his sights to Alison, giving her the same contemptuous stare. "Do we have a marriage, my dear, or just your version of a marriage?"

"You're drunk, Roger—"

"And you better thank your god, if any, that I am."

"You behave like this in public, yet think you're so damnably superior—"

"My friends insist that I am." Roger shrugged. "Must you drag me down to what you are? Is that what you want?"

"You know what I want." Her voice was cold.

For the first time Roger almost laughed. "This is hardly the place to discuss that, is it?"

Roger accepted the drink the waiter set before him, gave Van the slightest nod. "You sell stocks, Taber? Surely that isn't the way you met my wife?"

"I met Van here at the club," Alison said. "I told you."

Roger stared straight into Van's face and laughed. "My grandmother used to say a woman that's easy to meet might be deadly to know, Taber."

He waited but neither Van nor

Alison answered him. Across the small table, Van met Alison's eyes. His nod was almost imperceptible.

They met once more secretly in her convertible, planned their caper in detail. They did't make love. Somehow Van couldn't do that.

Van bought an adhesive tape roll in a drugstore thirty miles from King's Bay. In the same town he purchased a ten cent pack of paper, a clothesline, flashlight and batteries at a local hardware store. He called Alison from a pay phone when he returned to King's Bay. "I'm ready when you are."

"Tonight," she said. "I've had it.

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Roger's playing golf. He'll come home high. I'll feed him Scotch for dinner. When he passes out, I'll drive him out on the Nix road. You have the ransom note ready—and I'll trade you."

He parked in a gloomy vale, waiting until he saw her car approaching on the lonely night road. The lights flashed out. Her car stopped near his. He walked over.

Roger lay sprawled with his head against the door. "Is he drunk?"

"He took the Scotch like it was being rationed. He'd been weeping with his cronies because Nels Nix quit the country club today."

"I'm for anything that makes it easier." Van tossed the typed ransom note on the seat beside her. He wore gloves. "You can touch it. They'd expect to find your fingerprints on it, since you found it."

She watched, fascinated, while Van bound Roger's wrists between his shoulder blades, pressed adhesive tape across his eyes and lips. Roger did not stir, or protest. He secured Roger's ankles and then carried him as if he were a child to his own car.

Alison ran across the darkness. She pressed herself against him.

"Hold me," she whispered. "Once. For luck."

"Who needs it?" Van said. "We're going to be rich. We can buy our own luck from now on."

"Can we get away with it?" She clung to him, trembling.

"We've got to now. The only ticklish part will be the payoff. The old man is to put the money in the back seat of your car. You're to drive out Desert Highway, alone, toss the packet into a briar clump near Pine Rock—"

"Only I'll throw away a package of paper that will blow away before anyone can get to it. Then we'll have the world, darling. Just us!"

He watched until she was gone. Then he got into his own car, drove slowly to the abandoned Nix house. He liked nothing about this. Owls, field rats and bats challenged his approach. Darkness congealed into sudden unyielding spider webbing. His flashlight showed only wan yellow cones compressed in blackness.

He lugged Roger into the musty front room and tossed him on the flooring as if he were a sack of potatoes. The long wait was agonizing. Every sound magnified itself in the darkness. He welcomed Roger's presence, even if he were unconscious.

Two hours before dawn he heard a car racing along the lane, shocks slamming as tires struck chugholes, headlamps vibrating crazily.

"Van!"

Alison lunged from her car, almost hysterical, calling for him. Van ran out on the veranda, playing the flashlight ahead of him.

She ran into his arms, shaking

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violently. "It's all gone wrong, Van. Roger's father came through with the money. I drove out on the highway, but police were out there. I had to throw that money, Van. I had to!"

He stared into the darkness, seeing perils her tone did not even suggest. He shook, too, deep in the pit of his belly.

"What are we going to do about him?" He jerked his head toward the interior of the house. "We can leave him here, go back to town: Forget the whole thing, that's all we can do. If he was passed out, he doesn't know you had any part in it. You played it straight with his old man. It just didn't work out, Alison. We've got to pretend it never happened."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Roger said. He stepped through the door, his voice soft, inlaid with mosaics of hatred.

Van released Alison and heeled around. He stared at the gun in Roger's fist.

"You've been playing out of your league, Taber," Roger said. "Never date a woman that's easy. They all want something. That's why they make themselves available. Alison set you up, Taber. You think this caper didn't work out, but you're wrong. It's working just the way Alison planned it, until now, because I set both of you up."

Alison said, "You don't know what you're talking about."

Roger shrugged. "Is that so urgent, love? I'm the one with the gun." His gaze flicked across Van. "You trusted her so, you never even thought about searching me."

Alison stared at Roger. "I suppose you're going to kill us?"

"Precisely."

"You couldn't get away with it, even if you had the guts," Alison said.

"As usual, dear, you're wrong. But then, you've made a career of being wrong. I do have the guts. I'll kill you both and I'll admit it, because I'll not only have the stupid ransom notes you sent my father, but I've recorded this entire gimmick as you two planned it—in fact I've tapes of everything you said and did."

"You're lying." But some of the arrogance seeped out of Alison's voice.

"Oh, no, lover. Your car's been

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bugged for months. I've got your whole love affair on tape." Roger tilted the gun. "I can't even be sorry for you, Taber. The greedy always run risks commiserate with the stakes, don't they?"

Alison retreated, eyes wild. She whispered to the darkness, brokenly, "Nels—"

Roger laughed at her, but a gunshot cut across his laughter, fragmenting and destroying it. Roger toppled against the wall, and slid down along it.

Van heeled around. He had time to see Nelson Nix standing at the foot of the ravaged steps before Nix shot him.

He crumpled to his knees, turning on his side as he struck the floor.

"Come on, Al," Nix said. "Let's get out of here."

"Didn't you hear Roger?" she cried. "The tapes! You're on them, too."

"Forget the tapes," Nix said. "You're going back home, just the way we planned. You know nothing about this. Taber kidnaped Roger. They fought over this gun —" He tossed it negligently toward Roger's body.

Van stared at the gun. It was so near, yet impossibly far. He was alive, but unable to move, unable to die. He saw the way it would be for Nelson Nix and Alison. Alison would inherit Roger's fortune and they would live happily ever after —over his dead body—which was, he saw now, the way they'd planned it all along.

He lay immobile, seeing what they had done to him. Nix killed Roger and him with such ease. Violent death ran in his family, didn't it?

Van was barely alive when the police surrounded him at daybreak. He didn't even bother asking who alerted them. He had all the answers, now, when it was too late.

The police shouted at him, but he barely heard them any more.

Transfixed, he listened, hearing laughter. He trembled at the unearthly wailing approaching in the wan dawn overcast.

Then he saw her coming nearer —the green luminosity, the wraith, the dark lovely ectoplasmic figure, raging with hysterical laughter.

He watched her pause above him, then smoke past like gray clouds, take Roger's hand. Filled with infinite sadness that soured his laughing, he saw them walk away together, leaving him there, slouched, crippled with the sound of their crazy laughter.

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EVERY POSSIBLE MOTIVE

by TALMAGE POWELL

Three frightened people waited in that darkened room. Three, and a grim unwanted guest—Murder!

BIGBY RASSMAN had given the simple, intimate dinner in the smaller of the two dining rooms of his manorial home. It was a snug room, but it made no pretensions of humility. The walls were panelled in hand-rubbed Honduran mahogany; the carpeting came from Iran; the draperies were of pure silk.

The room effectively shut away the world beyond these walls.

As Gaspard cleared the china from the snowy linen, Bigby said,

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"We'll have brandy in here, I think."

Lean and faultlessly efficient, Gaspard in a matter of moments had crystal snifters before Bigby and the three dinner guests.

"That will be all, Gaspard."

"Very good, Mr. Rassman."

Gaspard carried his dark, well-cut personage out of the room. The heavy door closed. In the silence, the click of the lock tumbler was inordinately loud.

A heavy, powerful, balding man whose features looked as if they had been carved from solid bone, Rassman surveyed the two men and the young woman who shared his table.

They weren't alarmed, not yet; merely puzzled by the locking of the door.

"Are we in for a game, Uncle Big?"

Elise, Rassman's niece, was lovely tonight, a flawless, lacquered blonde with green eyes and a body for which bikinis had been designed. She was looking at her uncle with a certain insolence, a haughty and predatory image in a black dinner dress of expensive simplicity.

At the far end of the table, Evan Payne was still looking at the closed door. A porcine bulk with softening edges, Evan's bulbous, sagging face looked damp, clammy. He felt Bigby's gaze and managed a weak smile.

"Last time I was behind a locked dining room door was at a stag party," said Payne.

"Maybe Bigby is afraid we won't pay the check," Roger Lawrence said. He sat across the table from Elise, at Rassman's left. At thirty, Roger was handsome in a cold, cruel way. Looking at Bigby with hard, steady eyes, Roger lifted his brandy and sipped. He managed to make it a gesture of disdain.

"One of you will pick up the check before the evening is over," Rassman said calmly.

"Whatever are you talking about, Uncle Big?"

"Murder, my dear niece."

Roger Lawrence set his brandy glass down slowly. Elise's chair tipped as she stood up.

"I'm really in no mood, Uncle Big, to—"

"Sit down, Elise."

"I really don't know what's come over you," she said. "From the moment Gaspard served the entree, there has been something strange about you. I must say that I haven't enjoyed the dinner at all!"

"Sit down, Elise," Rassman said. His tone was conversational. The glitter in his eyes seemed to give him power over her sleek muscles. She eased haltingly into her chair.

"Bigby . . ."

"Yes, Evan?"

"I—do feel you owe us an explanation."

"Of course, Evan. One of you has tried to murder me."

Evan Payne stared witlessly.

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Roger Lawrence said, "Impossible!"

"Killing me might prove difficult," Rassman said, "but not impossible."

A measure of hauteur had returned to Elise. "You sound morbid, Uncle Big. What makes you think an attempt has been made on your life?"

"I don't think it, Elise. I know it. And a clever attempt it was, too."

Rassman clipped the end from a cigar and lighted it. "Yesterday, as I do frequently at this time of year, I decided to bag a few birds here on the estate. Fortunately, before taking the dogs to the fields, I checked the gun thoroughly. The barrel, I found, had been plugged with hardened clay."

Rassman's gaze drifted over the three faces before him. "A pull of the trigger and I should have caught the breech squarely in the face. Yes, there might have been a few questions. But who could actually prove I hadn't accidentally plugged the barrel by resting or dropping the gun against the ground? I'd have been treated to an excellent funeral, I'm sure, and the crime would have been perfect enough."

"Maybe you did plug the barrel at some time in the past," Roger said. "After all, when you're crawling those old fences, gullies and thickets it would be easy to bump the barrel of the gun in a spot of loam or soft clay. Why do you think one of us did it?"

"The three of you know my shooting habits," Rassman said.

"Not a convincing reason," Roger said.

"There is more, much more. Since I last went shooting, only you three might have had access to the gun. The act in itself would have been simple, quick. A wad of clay carried into the house in purse or pocket. A few seconds to lift down the gun and plug the barrel."

The clamminess on Evan Payne's face was congealing into heavy drops of sweat. "Maybe an outsider slipped in, Bigby."

"Come now, Evan. That's too far-fetched. An intruder would have a tough time crossing the entire estate, entering the house and leaving again, all unnoticed. Neither would an outsider be sufficiently acquainted with my habits to know that a plugged gun barrel would have every chance of killing me—and only me, I might add, since I permit no one else to fire the gun. Also, we can't suppose it was a guest. I've had no house guests since the gun was fired last, other than the three of you."

Rassman stood up, crossed to the sideboard, and added an ounce of brandy to his snifter. "Having established that only you three had opportunity, we come now to the clincher. Motive. I am heartily disliked in many quarters. I don't mind. As a matter of fact, it gives me a certain pleasure. The truly strong are never liked."

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Rassman strolled easily to the table, reseated himself. "Mere dislike is hardly enough to inspire murder. The reason must be much deeper, much more urgent. Only the three of you have such reasons."

Evan Payne had half risen, his bulk quivering. "Bigby, you know I'd never—"

"Oh, sit down," Rassman said crossly. "Who knows what the coward will do when his mental worms have gnawed deeply enough? And plugging a gun barrel was indeed a cowardly act."

"But I've no reason," Payne said. "Others, perhaps, but not I."

"Your reasons are sufficient," Rassman said.

A glint of enjoyment came to his eyes.

"Every murder in the history of mankind," he said, "has been motivated by one of four motives or a combination of them.

"There is the murder resulting from insanity, including the momentary aberration as in a crime of passion.

"Since you are all reasonably sane, we're concerned with the three broad categories of motives which have filled graveyards from time immemorial. Shall we start with you, Elise?"

She lighted a cigarette. "Why not? What is my category, Uncle?"

"Gain," Rassman said. "The subdivisions are many. To gain time for an undertaking. To gain directly through a will, insurance, the death of a business partner, as an heir. To create the opportunity for gain. To remove an obstacle in the path of gain, as in the commission of an armed robbery and the appearance or resistance of another person. I could go on and on.

"You, Elise, are weary to death of the tight budget I keep you on, the sort of life I insist you lead. You see time slipping from you, your youth melting away while an enticing fortune remains out of reach. You are my only heir. You would gain both the fortune and the opportunity to use it, should I die. You must admit that you've wished fervently for my funeral."

Rassman shifted his gaze to Roger Lawrence's handsome face. "Category number two, Roger. Escape. Murder as an escape from the destructive results of a past action or fact. A witness must be silence by death. A marriage becomes a trap, and a spouse is killed. A man fleeing a crime must destroy his nemesis. A woman feels impelled to keep her secret life a continued secret.

"The threat from which you must escape, Roger, is hard and brutal. Both of us recognize it. I've kept silent this long because of a promise I made years ago on the beaches of Normandy. Your father was the one real friend I've ever had, Roger. He offered me ultimate proof, by risking himself to save another. I made him a promise, as he died, and I've abided by

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its letter, even though I've never liked you at all.

"I've treated you like a son, Roger, but if the girl in the hospital dies, I'll have to tell the police who the drunken hit-run driver was."

"Would you, if I were actually your son?" Lawrence asked.

Rassman looked at him a moment.

"Yes," he said, "and I'm sure you already knew the answer."

"It was," Roger conceded, his face slightly haggard, "a rather pointless question on my part."

Evan Payne moistened his lips to speak. He made a motion with his hand. It reminded Rassman of a fawning beggar seeking alms.

Before Evan could speak, Rassman said, "Your category, Evan, is perhaps the most interesting of all. Jealousy and hatred. The motive that degenerates a man, if latent degeneration were in him. The motive that tests a man. He is strengthened, if he conquers and rises above it. He is morally destroyed, if he does not.

"You were a weakling, Evan, who inherited a family business. I bought in. Soon I was in control. You became a despised lackey who took my orders and performed grubby little routine tasks where you were of some value.

"You learned long ago to fear me, Evan, my power over your well-being and future. The jealousy and hatred has distilled in you day by day, year by year. Even now, as

you cower before me, the motive lies deep in your eyes."

Payne made a despairing effort to smile, to laugh it off. "Bigby, you know, while I might envy you, I wouldn't try to murder you."

"None of you will try again," Rassman said. "My man servant Gaspard is not without his price. Tonight before dinner, I gave him instructions and the means to carry out his task. The poison was odorless and tasteless. It will leave no trace. You see, I too now have a motive. Category number two. I wish to escape being murdered."

"Poison?" Evan Payne stumbled to his feet.

"It came with the dessert," Rassman said.

Payne stumbled backward, away from the table. "You—you'd kill us?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Evan," Rassman said with contempt. "I'm merely giving you the chance to insure your own life by insuring mine."

From the side pocket of his dinner jacket, Rassman took three small vials of pale tan liquid and

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set them on the table. "This is the antidote," he said.

As Payne rushed forward, Rassman rose and motioned him back. "Not so fast, Evan. There is a price." He reached to the inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew a thin sheaf of folded papers. "Each of you will sign the proper copy of this." He dropped the papers on the table. "In return, you get the antidote which immediately will counteract and neutralize the poison."

Elise and Roger were standing now. Payne pulled his shirt collar with his finger, looking longingly at the three small bottles.

Roger touched the papers. "What are we putting our names to?"

"A statement that one of the three of you has already made an attempt on my life, that no one else has sufficient motive for my murder," Rassman said. "The reasons that inspire your murderous intentions are detailed. When you have signed, I shall place the papers beyond your slightest possibility of obtaining them. I shall make arrangements for delivery of the papers to the proper authorities if I happen to die violently."

"You're bluffing," Roger said. "You wouldn't take the chance on killing us!"

"I'm not killing you," Rassman said. "I'm merely giving a potential murderer the chance to commit suicide."

"I'll sign," Payne said, a sob in his voice. "Give me a pen, a—"

"Just a minute," Elise broke in. "How do we know we're not putting ourselves in the hands of a man who can ruin us any time he likes?"

"You'll have to take my word, my dear," Rassman said. "You have no other choice. You know that I never give my word lightly. And the word I give you is this: If I die peacefully in bed at a ripe old age, my last will and testament will contain all the necessary directions and instructions. Sealed envelopes containing your respective statements will be delivered to each of you."

"Please," Payne was gasping. "The antidote—"

Rassman uncapped a pen, picked up the papers, chose one, handed pen and paper to Evan Payne. The corpulent man bent over the table and put a shaky signature to the statement.

Rassman handed Payne one of the small bottles. Payne opened it, swallowed the liquid at a gulp. He grimaced against the bitter taste. "Bigby, are you sure—"

"You're as safe as a babe in its mother's arms," Rassman said, "and you may now go if you like."

He jingled a key from his pocket and tossed it to Payne. "You can unlock the door from this side. Gaspard removed his own key."

Payne rushed to the door. It opened, closed. He was gone.

Roger Lawrence had slowly picked up the pen. He studied the

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statement for a moment, and then signed it and threw the pen on the table. He lifted the antidote, drank it.

"Good night, Roger," Rassman said quietly.

Roger looked at him for one more moment, the muscles working in his face. He turned abruptly and walked out.

A silence came to the dining room. Elise moved slowly, reaching out to touch the pen and the remaining statement. She didn't pick either up.

"Tell me, Uncle Big, why all this bother? When the attempt was made on your life, didn't you think of the police?"

"But immediately," Rassman said.

"Yet you didn't call them in."

"I had a second thought," he said. "They are not always successful. They might never have found which of you three plugged the gun barrel. They might have decided on the wrong one. I didn't relish the thought of my potential murderer remaining free to try again. I was determined not to have my life ruined from living under such a shadow day by day. This way, not one of the three of you will ever dare to lift a finger against me again."

"But only two of us have signed your statements, Uncle."

"You will sign, Elise."

"Will I?" she said softly.

Her tone brought his glance to her, quickly.

The pain hit him high in the stomach, almost as if the jerking of his head had triggered it.

He gasped, went crashing away from the table as the first convulsion doubled him to the floor. He thrashed violently. But not for very long.

When Elise looked away from Uncle Big, she saw Gaspard standing in the dining room doorway. They moved with a rush toward each other. He folded his arms about her.

Elise shivered slightly. "It really was deadly, the poison you told me that he planned to use."

"Very deadly," Gaspard said in his rich baritone. "It will leave no trace, as he said. It will appear that an aging man has died of apoplexy. We can be together at last."

"Yes, my darling," Elise whispered. She lifted her face and kissed Gaspard with fervor.

And the thought crossed her mind that in all his analysis of the reasons for murder Uncle Big had overlooked one. Gaspard's motive. Murder for love.

Only Thirty Days to Wait for:

THE COFFIN MAKER by JONATHAN CRAIG

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One Little Bullet

He was a good looking guy, with money and plenty of charm. He had everything going for him—but one. He was dead and my job was to nab his killer

by HENRY KANE

NEW YORK is lousy with night clubs. There are strip joints, clip joints, jive joints, live joints, square joints, hip joints, crash joints, splash joints, crumb joints, class joints.

The Long-Malamed is class. All the way.

It is located on Fifty-fifth Street off Madison Avenue. It is a narrow, two-story, rust-red building with a shimmering, scarlet, patent leather canopy, and a shimmering, scarlet-adorned doorman.

Three steps up are heavy translucent glass doors and, when you push through, you're in the small ante room which is the cocktail lounge of the Long-Malamed.

Separating the cocktail lounge and the night club room are two winding white marble stairways, each—I had been informed by Tobias Eldridge, the amiable genius behind the bar—leading upstairs to the well furnished town apartment of Joe Malamed, one of the owners of the club.

I had never met Mr. Joe Malamed. He had recently moved up to

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the big time, coming from Miami and forming a partnership with a young man of many dollars, one Melvin Long.

Joe Malamed had a wife, and I had heard, too, that she took an active interest in the operation of the club.

I was seated at a hinge in the bar, near to the door and opposite the check-room, working on a tall scotch and water, and watching Miss Irene Whitney.

Nothing had been stacked like Miss Irene Whitney since the Pyramids. Miss Whitney was tall and perfect. Miss Whitney has a shock of tousled short-cut iridescent auburn hair that was practically indecent, a lovely nose, and dark blue eyes. Miss Whitney also had legs.

At the hazard of a guess. I would suggest that Miss Whitney had been hired by the Long-Malamed on the strength of her legs. That, anyway, is what her uniform declared. She wore spike-heeled black shoes, black opera-length nylons, a tiny flounced skirt (that was one flounce and no skirt), a black silk sash, a white silk blouse and a short sequined monkey jacket.

Miss Whitney was a serious student of the drama, attending a dramatic school in the daytime and acquiring the wherewithal to do same by checking coats in night-clubs at night, and offering cigarettes and fuzzy little pandas for sale. Miss Whitney was a floor show on her own.

The floor show moved to me at the bar.

"Hi," I said. "How's Yale?"

"Yale." Disparagement made wrinkles on her nose, adding to its effectiveness.

Yale was a young man who attended Yale University, a school of learning. Weekends he came into town for the avowed purpose of giving a rapid rush to Miss Irene Whitney. My name is Peter Chambers, and I am neither as young, handsome, unsubtle or rich as Yale, but I was in there pitching too.

This was Miss Whitney's second night in the employ of the Long-Malamed, and I'd been there both nights.

"Drink?" I said.

"Not with the boss sitting at the other end of the bar," Irene said.

Two men were seated at the far end. The one nearer to the archway was pale, slender and immaculately attired. He handled his drink with delicate fingers. He had straight white hair, parted in the middle, and neatly combed. He looked on the good side of sixty.

The other was perhaps fifteen years his junior, a small man, a rugged little man with a ruddy sun-creased neck and a face as pink as the shrimp-fed flamingos at Hialeah. They seemed in the midst of a gentlemanly argument, the slender man's voice quiet and modu-

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lated, the small man's intense and rasping.

"Which one?" I said to Tobias.

"The one with the white hair. He's Joe Malamed."

"Who's the other one?"

"Used to be top jockey in the whole country. Don't tell me you don't remember Frankie Hines?"

"That," I said, "was a long time ago. I thought he was dead, or something."

"Ain't dead nohow. Retired. Got a million enterprises. Got more loot than King Midas. Who the hell, Mr. Chambers, was this King Midas, anyway?"

I sipped and I smiled at Tobias Eldridge. Tobias was an old friend who had worked many of the top bars in our city of New York, as had I, except I was generally on the other side of the stick from Tobias.

"King Midas?" I said. "A myth. Everything he touched turned to gold."

"That's Frankie," said Tobias. "Frankie Hines is loaded."

"Loaded," Irene said, "reminds me of the customers in the back room. They should be in the mood now for the cute little pandas, purveyed by yours truly, don't you think?"

"I think," I said.

Irene went to her check-room and I watched, appreciatively, as her hands went up over her head, attaching the strap about her neck. She came out bearing the tray of cigarettes and the pandas, winked at me, and proceeded with undulant grace through the archway and into the darkened room.

"You going in to see the show, Mr. Chambers?" Tobias asked. "It's going on any minute."

I was about to answer when Joe Malamed rapped on the bar for Tobias' attention. Tobias moved off, stumping the wooden bridge behind the bar, and refilled Malamed's glass.

The argument stepped up a notch, audible to me.

"Look," Joe Malamed said to Hines, "I owe you the dough and I admit it. But you're making a pest of yourself. Quit hounding me, and you'll get paid faster."

Frankie Hines said, "If I quit hounding you, I'll never get paid. And I'm sick and tired of waiting." He opened his knees and got off his stool. "If you want me to put the squeeze on, Joe, I got friends what can squeeze.

Malamed smiled up at Tobias. "Now he's threatening me."

"I beg your pardon," said Tobias blandly.

"Nothing," Malamed said. "Forget it. And you forget it too, Frankie boy. You'll be paid inside a week. Now go in and enjoy the show."

"Can I sit at your wife's table?"

"Be my guest," Malamed said. "She's sitting with our book critic friend, Charles Morse, and a few other people. You know Charley?"

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Frankie Hines had already disappeared into the darkness through the archway. Tobias returned to me.

"What's the hassle?" I said.

"Search me. When it's the boss who's in an argument, the bartender wears earlaps. You know how it is, Mr. Chambers."

The M.C.'s voice came through from the darkened room.

". . . *and now, ladies and gentlemen, Calvin Cole . . . the great Calvin Cole . . . the one and only . . . in an Afro-Cuban fantasy on the drums . . . assisted by Manaja . . . the dancing dervish.*" Now he made his joke. "*Hold on to your pockets, ladies and gentlemen. Darkness will descend upon the room. Total darkness.*" His voice rose to a high pitch. "*Calvin Cole . . . and Manaja.*"

All the lights went out. A tiny spot played on the glistening features of Calvin Cole as he rapped out his rhythms against the skin-tight drums he held between his knees.

I found a place just inside the archway, leaning against the wall, holding my drink. Now, lightning from the spot hit the stage in garish waves as Manaja began her torso-fling performance. Her copper body had been rubbed with oil, reflecting the bursting flashes of light . . . light and darkness . . . light and darkness. I watched for some five minutes and then I went back into the gloom of the cocktail lounge. Tobias Eldridge was in the check-room, feet up like a banker, smoking.

"What's with you?" I asked. "You quit?"

"Resting," he said. "Nobody at the bar except Mr. Malamed. Everybody watching Calvin and the Manaja. Wow, that Manaja!"

I extended my glass. "Let's freshen this up, huh?"

Tobias sighed, ground out the cigarette in a sea-shell ashtray and stood up.

"Okay. I'm ready." He stretched anguidly. "That Manaja!" He walked behind the bar.

Mr. Joe Malamed had his arms crossed on the bar. His head nestled in his arms.

Tobias reached behind him for a bottle, and I moved to Mr. Malamed.

"I'm buying," I said, "as long as it's so lonely out here."

Mr. Malamed made no answer at all.

I touched him. His head moved.

Blood made a bright red trickle on the white bar.

Tobias Eldridge gulped a brandy but it did nothing for the pallor of his face.

"This guy's dead," I said.

The lights went on in the inner room. Ruth Benson, the chanteuse, came on, singing her naughty songs.

"Dead?" Tobias said. "You sure?"

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"One little bullet. Clean through the temple. I'm sure."

"One little bullet," Tobias said in wonderment. "One lousy little bullet." His voice reached up to falsetto. "Why, the guy was just sitting here, just sitting here with a drink . . ."

The first one out was Irene Whitney.

She saw what I held in my hands, and screamed. Piercingly.

Ruth Benson's song stopped. People poured out of the inner room. Screams topped screams. The men made a rush for the check-room, grabbing at coats. The cocktail lounge swarmed with hysteria.

I dropped Malamed back on the bar and fought through to the thick glass doors. I shot the bolt, locking the doors, and then I turned and spread my arms out wide like a young cop trying to hold up the pandemonium of onrushing traffic.

"All right," I yelled. "Everybody Quiet. *Quiet.*"

A young man in a tuxedo, dragging his coat, rushed me, trying to get out. I wound up a fist and caught him as he came. He went down clean. It helped. The noise simmered down to bubbling sounds.

"Quiet," I yelled. "Shut up, everybody."

Suddenly there was absolute silence. The women stared at me, goggle-eyed. The men stared at me exactly like the women.

"All right," I said. "A guy's been murdered. Nobody leaves till the cops come. That clear?"

There was no argument.

"Fine," I said. "Now all you guys start putting your coats back into the check-room. And somebody get this drunk in front of me off the floor."

Somebody did. Some of the men moved to the check-room and hung their coats back.

I said: "All right. Now all of you go back to your tables. All of you go back where you were."

The crowd began to thin out. I said: "Any music in the house?"

A woman's voice came back at me. "Yes."

"Well, get them playing, will you?"

The woman's voice called, "Stan, get the boys together. Start them playing."

"Right, Mrs. Malamed. Right you are. Okay, boys. Let's go. On the double."

Soon there was music.

"Okay," I said. "Everybody back in place. Nobody comes in, nobody goes out. Till we get the cops."

A young man, a guy with broad shoulders and black hair, shouldered through to me.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot."

"Who are you?"

"Melvin Long, Joe Malamed's partner."

"Well get them back to their ta-

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bles, Melvin. Get them all back to where they were."

"You're Chambers, aren't you? Peter Chambers?"

"How do you know?"

"Seen you around."

"Okay. Now get them back, huh?"

Soon enough the coats were back in the check-room and the customers were back in their chairs. Nobody remained in the cocktail lounge except Malamed, head-down on the bar near the archway, Tobias rigid near the brandy bottle behind the bar, Irene Whitney near the check-room, and Melvin Long nervously rubbing his hands in front of me.

"You too," I said. "You and Miss Whitney. Back there exactly where you were."

Long said, "He's right, Irene. Come on. You were out on the floor."

He led her through the archway and now I was alone with Tobias. I left my station at the glass doors and went to the bar. I said, "One for you, one for me, and then you call the cops."

I had scotch neat.

He had brandy.

Then he reached down, brought up the phone, stuck a trembling forefinger in the slot marked O. and whirled the dial.

FIFTEEN minutes later. Detective Lieutenant Parker and his gang of experts from Headquarters held class in the Long Malamed.

Parker, out of Homicide, was a straight cop with no curves. He was squat and solid and built like a beer barrel. He had a square jowl, crew-cut black hair, strong white teeth and black eyes. Parker had a respect for his fellow men, excepting criminals, and including private eyes. Detective Lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide, New York City, was an old and valued friend.

Under his capable supervision a good deal of work was accomplished in a comparatively short period of time.

Louis Parker summed it up: "The guy was killed from a bullet shot from the inside room. What with the drum raps and the light flashes, the pistol shot went unnoticed. He was killed by a thirty-eight. He was a sitting duck, a perfect target, out in the light of the cocktail lounge, near enough to the archway. Nobody saw anybody with a gun, they were all watching that oiled-up Manaja. Pretty gorgeous, that Manaja. And everybody was seated at his respective table, nobody went to the john or nothing. This eliminates quite a group."

"Why?" I said.

"Because I've got experts, and they've got instruments that measure. Now, from the trajectory of the bullet and the angle of entrance into the temple, considered in con-

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junction with the particular shape of the room—"

"Trajectory," I said, my eyebrows up in admiration. "Real fancy."

"Means the curve described by a body moving through space—the body, in this case, being a bullet discharged from a thirty-eight. Any way, it eliminates a goodly group, and places in jeopardy only those within the segment from whence the shot could have been fired."

"Whence," I said. "Brother, what are our cops coming to?"

"The room seats two hundred and eight. And it was filled to capacity. But within our circle of jeopardy—only two tables: that of Mrs. Joe Malamed, and a table seating a party of six, visitors in from San Francisco, with not the remotest acquaintanceship with Joe Malamed."

"That narrows it down plenty, doesn't it?"

"And how it does." Parker turned to one of his uniformed minions. "Okay, let them go now. They get their coats out of the check-room and blow. Take the names, occupations, addresses. Have them show identification."

He consulted a card. "The ones that stay are Claire Malamed, Melvin Long, Charles Morse, Frank Hines, and Ruth Benson."

"Why do they stay?" I asked.

"Because they were the ones seated at Mrs. Malamed's table during Calvin Cole's performance." He called to the cop again. "It's okay for Morse, Hines and Long to get their hats and coats. That whole crew's going downtown with us."

They lined up at the check-room like an impatient queue at the box office of a hit show. The men obtained their hats and coats, took the arms of their girl friends, and hurried the hell out through the heavy glass doors.

I found a spot near Parker at the bar and I said, "Is it all right if I have a drink?"

"Sure. And I want to thank you for the way you handled this, Pete. Nice job locking the doors and keeping them here."

"Scotch," I said to Tobias. To Parker: "How does it look?"

"Stinks," he said.

"But why?"

"First, no gun. No weapon. Nothing in sight, and this is a big point. Second, these." He brought up a pair of old leather gloves. "Found them right by the archway. Dropped during the excitement after Whitney screamed. They don't belong here, do they? Don't belong in a swank night club, a pair of broken-down, grimy, ordinary leather gloves."

"No, they don't."

"Whoever did this job, planned it," "You shoot off a gun, you get nitrate impregnations in your palm. You wear leather gloves, the impregations remain in the gloves.

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These pair fit a man or a woman. Where does that leave me?"

"You can trace gloves, can't you?"

"You ought to know better than that, Pete. With you I don't have to make like a sherlock. These are an ordinary pair of leather gloves purchased, maybe, easy, six months ago. Thousands of stores sell them to hundreds of thousands of customers right across the counter. We'll make the routine try, of course, but it don't figure."

"You're so right, Lieutenant."

"Now we're taking that bunch from Mrs. Malamed's table downtown for a fast paraffin test for disclosure of nitrates in the palm. We'll find nothing."

He tapped the gloves. "We'll find it all here."

"What about prints? On the gloves?"

"Whoever was smart enough to figure the gloves was smart enough not to get prints on the gloves."

"Stinks," I said, "is right."

I drank part of my drink and turned toward the check-room. Most of the clients of the Long-Malamed had already vacated. Frankie Hines got his coat and hat and tipped Irene a dollar.

"Well, thank you," Irene said.

Hines and Melvin Long, wearing their coats, joined us at the bar and ordered drinks from Tobias. The next in line at Irene's check-room was a tall, distinguished man of about thirty-five, with grey temples, curly dark hair, light blue eyes and a thin mustache.

"Charles Morse," the man said to the cop with the notebook. "Book critic." He showed identification, then he handed his check to Irene. She helped him with the coat, accepted his tip.

"What's the address?" the cop said.

"Fifteen East Nineteenth."

"Thanks," the cop said. "You stay."

"Yes. I know."

Morse moved toward us at the bar, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his dark blue coat.

Suddenly, he froze.

A grimace grew on his mouth.

"What's the matter?" Parker called.

Morse's right hand came out of his coat pocket. It held a gun. A nickel-plated, pearl-handled revolver that looked like a thirty-eight. I heard a gasp. I turned. Melvin Long's face had gone whiter than a napkin at the Waldorf.

Parker and Frank Hines rushed at Morse. Parker used a handkerchief and took the revolver out of Morse's hand.

"This yours?" Parker said.

"No. Of course not."

"What's it doing in your pocket?"

"I wish I knew."

Parker squinted down at the gun and an unhappy smile widened his mouth. "This looks like it." He wrapped it in the handkerchief and

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handed it to a cop. "You sure?" he said to Morse.

"Sure I'm sure. Look, Lieutenant, I wouldn't kill a man, then put the gun in my own coat pocket, then come up with it and display it to you. Now, would I?"

"No. You wouldn't." Parker said. "Figures during that excitement around the checkroom, everybody grabbing for coats, somebody shoved that gun into the first available coat pocket. That's the way it figures." He sighed, and his voice came up. "All right. Everybody on my list, let's go."

Fingers squeezed my arm. Melvin Long said, "I want to talk to you. Where?"

"You know Schmattola's?"

"Yes."

"I'm always there after curfew."

"After curfew? I said as soon as possible."

"By the time they get through with you, it'll be after curfew."

"All right, Mr. Chambers. Wait for me. Please."

"Check," I said.

Parker called: "Let's go, everybody. Come on."

ERNIE SCHMATTOLA'S Pizza Parlor was located on Forty-ninth Street off Sixth Avenue. Where most restaurants opened at about eleven in the morning and closed at about eleven at night. Ernie opened at eleven at night and closed at eleven the next morning. There are a good many late birds in New York who get hungry at the most inappropriate hours, and these are the birds that Ernie served.

Schmattola's was a mass of many rooms, with scurrying waiters and the thrum of constant and overlapping conversation. The cooks in the kitchen were the best in the land, as were the prohibitive prices which prohibited, it seems, nobody.

Ernie himself was a squat man, the shape of a butter tub and with the strut of a penguin. He was swarthy with dark, beady, humorous eyes, and he was the soul of compassion.

To his friends he served, on call, compassionate after-hour drinks in reminiscent tea-cups. I was a friend.

He met me at the door and I said, "I want privacy, Ernie. I want privacy, a double scotch, water, white bread and ravioli."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Chambers."

"I'm expecting a friend. He'll ask for me."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Chambers."

He took me to a nook away from the crowd. I sipped my scotch, sniffed my ravioli, and dug in. I began to think about the Long Malamed. Of the people at the table of jeopardy, as Parker had so quaintly put it, I had seen Frankie Hines (of whom I knew by past bright reputation), I had seen Charles Morse

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(of whom I knew by present unblemished reputation), and I had spoken with Melvin Long. I had not even seen Mrs. Claire Malamed, or if I had, I didn't know who she was. Ruth Benson I had observed singing from afar at various clubs about the town. So much for the cast of characters.

I had finished the ravioli and was mopping up the plate with the wonderful white bread when Ernie ushered Melvin Long to my table.

I said, "Something?"

"Can I get a drink?"

"It might be arranged."

"I need one. Gin and tonic."

"That's too fancy for here. You can have gin, in a tea-cup."

I nodded at Ernie.

"How was it downtown?" I asked.

"Pretty lousy."

"They find anything?"

"They found nothing. All of us responded negative to the test. We were all sent home."

"I see. Now what's with the urgent conversation with me?"

He squirmed around in his seat like he was sitting at a concert and didn't like music. Then he blurted. "That was my gun."

"What?"

"The gun that Charles Morse produced, it was my gun, I'd swear it."

"Your gun?"

"A shining, nickel-plated, thirty-eight calibre revolver, with a pearl-type handle. There aren't too many around like that."

"No."

"Look, pal. Did you kill Joe Malamed?"

"No."

We sat in silence and starred across at one another. He seemed a nice enough guy, about twenty-eight, with glistening black well-combed hair, scared brown eyes, dark cheeks closely shaven to a blue sheen, and long white fidgety fingers with buffed nails.

I said, "Why do you think it's your gun?"

"Because I had one exactly like that. It disappeared."

"Got a license for the gun?"

"Yes."

"How'd it disappear?"

"I don't know. It was in my apartment. Then it wasn't."

"Any idea who hooked it?"

"Any one of perhaps five hundred people."

"Do that a little slow for me, will you, pal?"

"I have a penthouse suite on Central Park South. Two days ago, I had a cocktail party, and it was open house. People came and people went. You know how it is."

"Yeah," I said.

"Here's the truth, Mr. Chambers. When it comes to guns—any kind of firearms—I'm a bust. I have a phobia about guns. I may have fired a gun at targets maybe three times in all my life, and each time I was scared to death."

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"Then how come you own one?"

"I got it as a gift. I . . . I sort of liked it, made me feel good, that sort of thing. I got a license for it, and kept it around the apartment —for protection, sort of, though I don't think that's the real reason."

"What would the real reason be?"

"I don't know. Made me a big man with a gun. Blew up my ego in some cockeyed kind of way." His smile was wan.

"All right, then, Melvin—"

"My friends call me Mel."

"Okay, Mel. Just what do you want me to do for you?"

"I want to retain you—right now—to discover who murdered Joe Malamed."

"Don't you think the cops can do it?"

"That's just what I'm afraid of. I'll wind up as their pigeon. Guns can be traced, can't they?"

"I take it you didn't mention any of this to Lieutenant Parker."

"No. I didn't mention it. Will you handle it, Mr. Chambers?"

"Did you kill him, Mel?" I asked again.

"No, I didn't."

"Okay. I'll handle it. But I'll tell you right now, if it develops that you're it, I turn you in, pal, *and* I keep the fee." I tried a smile. "It's what you call ethics."

He took out a folding check book and a small ball-point pen and he scribbled and he scraped the check from the pad and handed it over. It was for one thousand dollars. I like rich clients.

"Fine," I said and folded the check and put it away. "One question. About you and Joe Malamed."

His face puckered. "Yes?"

"How'd you get along, you and Joe—say, as of yesterday?"

He looked for more gin in the teacup. There was no more gin in the tea-cup. "I'd rather not discuss that."

"Suit yourself. You're the client." What the hell—it would be easy to find out."

"Where'll I be able to reach you, Mr. Chambers? I mean—"

"I've got an office, but I'm almost never there. I'm up nights and sleep days, mostly. Here at Schmattola's. From curfew till the sun starts coming up, you figure to find me here."

"Swell."

He stood up and rubbed his hands. "Okay if I leave now?"

"Not at all. Leaving myself. Hang on till I pay the check, and I'll ride up a way with you."

THE NEXT day I made the bank by a whisker and deposited his check.

There's nothing more dreary than a night club before it opens, except a graveyard in a fog. The Long-Malamed smelled of yesterday's cigarette smoke and today's disinfectant. One bright light cast long and frightening shadows. To-

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bias was behind the bar vigorously putting sparkle to the cocktail glasses.

"Hello, Mr. Chambers," he said. "You're a little previous. We ain't serving yet."

"You're serving him, aren't you!" I pointed to the back of a man at the end of the bar.

"He's special."

"Is he?"

The man turned around. It was Louis Parker.

"Special enough, Tobias. My apologies." I placed my flat package I had just purchased down on the bar and went to Parker. I said, "How goes it, Lieutenant?"

"Not too good. What brings you pub-crawling this early?"

"Same brings you, I imagine."

"You mean you cajoled a client out of this mess?"

"That's the truth, Lieutenant."

"Who?"

"Confidential, but I've got a hunch you'll know sooner than you think."

"We're not going to cross wires, are we, Pete."

"With other guys in the Department—maybe. But not with you, Louis."

"Thanks."

"How goes it?"

"Stinks."

"The gloves?"

"Just the way I figured. Absolutely nothing."

"The gun?"

"Only prints are Charles Morse's, which is as it should be, since he handled it taking it out of his pocket. The rest were smudges."

"Pretty smart."

"Smarter than you think. I had one angle. I figured that would do it for me."

"What was that, Lieutenant?"

"All our suspects furnished us with specimens of their prints. Voluntarily, of course, but on request."

"But if the gun had no useful prints, and the gloves had nothing—what'd you need the specimens for?"

"My angle. Any guesses about my angle?"

"Nope. I'm dull this afternoon."

"There's stuff people forget, when they're not too smart."

"Such as?"

"Such as you leave no prints when you wear gloves and no nitrate particles hit your palm—but what people frequently forget is that prints can be left *inside* the gloves. Check?"

"You're a cutie, Lieutenant."

"Well, whoever pulled this was cuter. They made sure to rub the fingerprints off the gloves, so nothing showed." He shrugged. "Smart operator, Petie. Real smart. It'll be a pleasure to nab him. Or her."

"Trace the gun yet?"

"We're working on that."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." He got off the stool, went to the door, said, "Keep in touch," and left.

"Nice man," said Tobias.

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"The best. How's about an eye-opener?"

"Only for you, Mr. Chambers. On the house." He poured.

I raised the glass. "First today."

The doors swung and Irene Whitney entered, pert in a neat blue suit and rosy with the wind.

"First today," I said at Irene Whitney.

She made a prim face. "Anybody who drinks before nightfall is a drunk."

"That's me," I said, and knocked it down. It burned and I shuddered. "Got a present for you."

"For me?" said Tobias.

"For her," I said.

"Naturally," said Tobias.

Irene hovered while I unwrapped the package. Her perfume was lovely. "Oh," she said with enough enthusiasm to equal the purchase price. "Opera length nylons! Long, wonderful lace nylons." She looked at me with real affection, kissed my cheek. "You're a thoughtful kind of guy." She kissed me again.

"You'll leave marks on his face." Tobias said.

"Let *me* worry," I said, "about marks on my face."

Irene leaned toward Tobias. "How's she taking it?" she said softly. "Mrs. Malamed."

"Like a trooper." He inclined his head toward the inner room. "She's inside, setting things up for tonight."

"If she asks for me, I'm up-

stairs, getting into my uniform." Her wonderful teeth shone in a smile. "Uniform, I call it." She took up the package. "Thanks, Peter."

"Date for tonight?" You've got your bribe."

"It's no bribe and you know it. Boy, how these men try to talk tough! Pick me up at closing?"

"You bet."

"Date for tonight." She went to the stairway, called back to Tobias: "Ruth here yet?"

"Upstairs."

She ran up the stairs. I watched her legs. Then I turned back to Tobias. "How's it set up, up there?"

"Joe Malamed's room in the rear, Claire Malamed's room in the front, a couple of toilets, and one room, in the middle, for acts to dress in."

"I get it. Now about this Frankie Hines."

"You mean that big tycoon?"

"I'm going to want to talk with him. Where do I find him? You know?"

"This time of day, you figure to reach him at the coffee pot."

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"The what?"

"Coffee pot."

"What coffee pot, Tobias?"

"One of his enterprises is a little coffee pot over on Fifty-second by Seventh. It's called The Horseshoe. It's easy to find. It's the one with no customers. I think that Frankie just keeps it to have a little hang-out for himself, maybe a hot meal sometimes when he's hungry."

He looked over my shoulder, and went back to polishing glasses. A young woman came up to us. She said, "I'm sorry, but we're not serving yet." She looked at the shot glass near me, and then she looked at Tobias.

Tobias said, "He's a cop."

"Cop?"

"Private," I said.

Tobias said, "Mr. Chambers, Peter Chambers—Mrs. Claire Malamed."

"Well . . ." I said. "Well . . ."

"May I ask why you're staring, Mr. Chambers?"

"Well . . ." I said. "Uh . . . I didn't expect . . . someone quite as young . . ." Lamely I added: "And beautiful."

Beautiful she was. And young she was. About twenty-five, I figured, with blue eyes, and a white skin like the inside of an apple, and pouting red lips, and clean sweeping eyebrows, and blonde blonde hair piled over her head in beautiful waves that shone like gold in the harsh white light. Her voice was low, deep, musical.

"Young?" she said. "I'm twenty-seven. I was married to Mr. Malamed for two years. We were quite happy. I've told all of this to Lieutenant Parker, but if there are any other vital statistics that I can supply. I'd be most happy."

"No," I said. "No, thank you."

"Then, if you'll excuse me, I have many things to attend to, Mr. Chambers."

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Malamed."

She looked from the shot glass, to me, to Tobias, turned and walked off toward the inner room. She was almost as good from the back as from the front.

"Tell her I left," I said to Tobias.

"What?"

"Tell her I left."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I'm leaving you, but I'm not leaving. I'm going"—I pointed —"upstairs."

I put a twenty on the bar. "Now, kindly don't be insulted. This is business, a business deduction. It's for you to say—in case of emergency—that I said goodbye, started for the doors, that you turned your back and went to work on the glasses. If I happened to sneak back—how would you know?"

"But Mr. Chambers . . ."

"Take the twenty, Tobias. I'm going up to talk to Irene."

I went. But I didn't go to Irene. I by-passed the middle room, and the toilets, and I didn't go to the back room. I went to the front

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room, which turned out to be a lavishly-furnished, large studio room with slanting glass facing north for a ceiling. I searched. I poked. I made like a hundred percent private eye hot on the trail of nothing. In a drawer of a dressing table I found a jewel box.

When I lifted the top, it opened to three stuck-out compartments like a little step ladder. There was a good deal of gleaming junk in it, some of it quite expensive. In the lower compartment there was a flat velvet box. It contained a large gold medal about three inches across and about a half-inch thick.

I took it out and examined it. Just from its weight it must have been worth three-four hundred dollars. One side of it had engraved crossed pistols, beneath that the initials C.M. The reverse side said *Target Club Competition, First Prize, June 15, 1952.*

I slipped the medal into my pocket, shut the velvet box, put it back into the jewel case, closed that and stuffed it back into the drawer. I tried another drawer. A voice behind me said:

"Looking for something special, Mr. Chambers?"

I twisted around. Claire Malamed had a black automatic in her hand and a funny look in her eye.

"No," I said. "Nothing special."

"Get out of here. Quickly, please."

"I'm not finished yet, Mrs. Malamed."

"You're finished." The automatic dipped and came up again.

I began to move toward her. "I've been retained to look into Mr. Malamed's murder. That's what I'm doing here, looking into Mr. Malamed's murder."

"You're trespassing."

"Am I?"

"Get out, and get out quickly." Her soft voice moved up a peg. "And don't come a step nearer to me."

I kept walking. Toward her. "I don't think you'll pull the trigger."

"Won't I, though? I'm within my rights, and you know it."

"I'm gambling you don't."

"Don't come near me."

I didn't stop. I lost my gamble.

She pulled at the trigger. I saw the knuckle of her forefinger go white with pressure.

Nothing happened.

She squeezed at it again.

Nothing happened again.

I was near enough. I slapped the gun from her hand and picked it up. I looked at it, emptied the clip and threw the gun on a divan.

"Automatics don't shoot," I said, "with the safety catch on."

I tried for a short, curt, military bow, and I got out of there.

THE HORSESHOE was a narrow white-walled slot set in between a huge dour warehouse and a clip joint with strippers. The only customer was the boss, seated at one of the stools, a thick-mugged cup

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of coffee in front of him. He was speaking to the counter-man, tall and very slender, wrapped in a white apron and wearing a white overseas-style hat.

"This is the pay-off," Frankie Hines was saying. "When a man don't like the coffee in his own coffee pot, maybe it's time to change up the help around here."

"But, Mr. Hines! I just made that coffee ten minutes ago."

"What'd you use to make it with? Buckshot?"

I coughed. I said, "Mr. Hines?"

Frankie whirled around. "Yeah? What's it to you?"

"My name's Peter Chambers."

"Oh, yeah, yeah. The hero of the Long-Malamed. The private eye. Yeah, yeah." He looked at me coldly. "What do you want here?"

"Talk."

"With me?"

"If you please, Mr. Hines."

"What can we talk about?"

"Let's talk and find out, huh? Let's try. How about one of these little tables?"

"Sure thing."

He moved and we sat at one of the tables. I said, "I've been retained, privately, on that Joe Malamed thing."

"Yeah?"

"You're one of the suspects, Mr. Hines."

"Not me, fella. They gave me that paraffin job down there, and I came out clean."

"So did everyone else. Which sets you all up as suspects again."

He contemplated that. "You know," he said. "You got something there." Then he smiled. "Only with me"—shrug—"no motive."

"There's a question about that."

"Is there?"

"Did you tell the police, Mr. Hines, about your argument with Mr. Malamed?"

"Now look here—"

"Did you tell them that you threatened him?"

"Now look, fella—"

"I didn't either, Mr. Hines."

He sat back, a little man with shrewd eyes, and a sun-baked, wrinkled face. "Why?" he said. "Why didn't you?"

"Because, I'm not put together that way. I don't put a man on the spot, unless the spot fits. I don't know, yet, about you."

"Thanks. You're a right guy."

"Do we talk, Mr. Hines?"

"You bet your saddle boots we do, Mr.—Mr.—what did you say your name was?"

"Peter Chambers."

"You bet your boots we do, Pete. You ask the questions, pal."

"What was the argument about?"

He brought out cigarettes, offered one to me, and we smoked. "Two months ago," he said, "down in Florida, he went for a bundle on the hayburners. He didn't want to wire to New York for more cabbage—didn't want his wife to

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know he got cleaned. I lent him fifteen G's."

"Fifteen thousand dollars? Just like that?"

"Oh, I took his I.O.U. and there was a nice little piece of change for a bonus. Now, when I come back up north and present my marker, he keeps stalling me."

"Maybe he couldn't afford to pay?"

"He could afford it, all right," Hines said.

"How would you know?"

"There's a lot of things I know, Mr. Chambers. I know that night club was a paying proposition. I know he lived high, wide and handsome. I know he carried two hundred thousand dollars worth of insurance for that young wife of his. And I know, only last week, he bought a five thousand dollar mink coat."

"For his wife?"

"His wife's *got* a mink coat. No. For that doll, the singer, Ruth What-ever-her-name-is. I ain't good at names, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Quite a guy, Mr. Joe Malamed."

"And his partner didn't like no part of that."

"Melvin Long?"

"Yeah, Melvin. You want to know why?"

"I do."

"Because that Melvin's crazy about that chick. You know her, Ruthie?"

"No, I don't. By the way, did you attend Long's cocktail party a few days ago?"

"Bet your saddle boots I did. What a shindig! Why?"

"Just asking. You know a hell of a lot about these people, don't you?"

"Know a hell of a lot more, but right now I ain't talking. I got a fifteen-thousand-dollar investment to protect. I'm going to make one last pitch for it tonight. If I don't get it—stand by for a load of information that'll have your ears buzzing. Where you going to be later on?"

"Tell you in a minute." I looked at my watch. "Hold it, huh?"

I got up and went to the phone books hanging from a hook near the booth. I checked Charles Morse's number, and I called him. I explained the situation and asked him if I could come over for a chat. He was very cordial, informed me that he would be at home, working, for the remainder of the afternoon, and that I would be welcome at any time. I thanked him, hung up and went out to Frankie.

I said, "I'll be on the town for maybe an hour or two. After that, home until midnight. That okay?"

"Fine. What's the phone number?"

I wrote out my phone number and gave it to him.

"Fine," he said, "fine. I got a hunch if I spill my information, you're going to have your killer, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

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"Chambers." I took back the sheet and wrote my name over the number. "Just so you don't forget," I said.

"You're going to have your killer, or you're going to come pretty close. That's my hunch, Peter."

"I hope you're right. What's wrong with right now for the information?"

"Got an investment to protect."

"It's up to you, Frankie."

"It's always up to Frankie."

I left him working up a new head of steam about the coffee for the counterman.

FIFTEEN EAST Nineteenth Street is near enough to Two Forty Centre Street, which is Police Headquarters. Louis Parker operated out of Headquarters so I dropped in on him first and found him desk high in paper work.

"Don't ask me how goes it," he said, "because the answer is the same. It stinks."

"Nothing new?"

"I told you ballistics proved up the murder gun, didn't I?"

"You didn't, but I assumed as much."

"You got anything for me, Peter?"

"Not yet. Not anything new."

Parker scrubbed at his head. He looked down at a sheet in front of him. "What have we got?" We got it narrowed down to one table. What have we got there?"

"Claire Malamed, Charles Morse, Ruth Benson, Frank Hines, Melvin Long. Whodunit, Professor?"

He scrubbed harder. "Search me. The wife? Why should she? She's sitting pretty, married to a very rich man. The book critic? Why should he? Plus he wouldn't plant the murder gun in his own pocket. The singer? Why should she? What would she have to gain? The ex-jockey? Don't figure, he was an old friend. The partner? Why should he? Plus he's supposed to have a phobia about guns. He says. What a mess, huh?"

"What about the gun?"

"No prints except what supposed to be on it. The rest, just smudges."

"You told me that too, Louis. I mean have you traced it yet?"

He wrinkled his eyes at me. "You keep bothering me with that one question. Why?"

"Just asking, Louis."

"Just asking—why?"

"Well, a gun ought to be easy to trace."

"Ought it to be?" His hand slammed down on the desk. "Well, this one ain't. Nothing is easy in this miserable case."

"Good bye, Lieutenant. You're in no humor for casual chit-chat."

Charles Morse's studio was warm and book-lined and thick-rugged. Charles Morse worked his cigarette through an ivory holder. He was lavish with his whiskey and that is always good by me.

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"I've found the Long-Malamed a nice spot, Mr. Chambers," he said. "Strange as it may seem, a book critic works hard, and needs relaxation like anybody else."

"Yes. I presume so." I sipped excellent scotch.

"A good many of us are frustrated writers. And I'm one of those. Our creative abilities just don't measure up to our critical tastes." He deposited ash in a tray. "So—under the yoke of my permanent frustration—I'm a pretty good customer at drinking bars, and I've been an excellent customer of the Long-Malamed ever since it opened. Which brings me to the reply to your question. Yes, I know most of the people at the club fairly well."

"Was there any disharmony—that you know of?"

"No—not really." His brows came together in thought. He was a handsome man. "There was a bit of controversy about a week ago, between Mr. Long and Mr. Malamed. The bartender, Tobias, was present at the time, and I was rather, well, an interested observer. Both men were drinking, and I wouldn't want to give it undue importance. But there was some sort of dispute."

"How did it wind up?"

"Mr. Malamed threatened Mr. Long, and Mr. Long laughed it off."

"*Malamed* threatened *Long?* Now there's a switch."

He smiled. "I didn't think it had any bearing on the case."

"Do you know what the argument was about?"

"It concerned a young lady. Ruth Benson. Do you know her? The young lady who sings."

"Yeah, Ruth Benson. Now what was the argument about, Mr. Morse?"

"I really don't know."

"I see." I set down the glass, uncrossed my legs, got up and we shook hands. "Thanks for your your help, sir."

"Not at all, Mr. Chambers. I wasn't of any help really, I know that. But if there's anything I can do, at any time—please don't hesitate. I'm at the Long-Malamed practically every night."

"Thanks. Thanks, again."

I went home. I called my office for messages but my secretary was gone for the day. I thought about the fact that I was certainly giving Joe Malamed my exclusive interest. But then I had accepted a one grand fee to discover exactly who had knocked off Joe Malamed. I shrugged and took a bath.

I lay long and smoked many cigarettes, littering the bathroom floor. Then I got out, rubbed down, cleaned up the bathroom floor and shaved. I went to the bedroom and set the clock for eleven, and at eleven it woke me. I yawned, went to shave, realized I had already shaved, went to the kitchen and raided the refrigerator. I cleaned

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up the dishes and dressed. I wore a formal navy blue suit because come what may on the Malamed thing, there was going to be a prize. I had a date with Miss Whitney come closing time.

I was at the door, going out, when the phone rang. I bulled back like a wrestler who suddenly discovers he's not in a fix. I caught the phone at its last ring.

"Hello," I said, "Hello."

"Hey. I thought you wasn't home."

"Who's this?"

"Frankie Hines."

"I'm glad you called."

"You're going to be gladder. Look, I'm in my joint, the Horseshoe. They ain't nobody here, no counterman, no kitchen help, no nobody. I'm alone, and I'm waiting for you. I want to talk with you."

"Fine. I'll be right there." This sounded good, I figured.

"The faster the better. I been pushed around plenty, and I'm ready now for some pushing around on my own. I'll show—"

There were four shots.

I heard them as clearly as though I were there.

Then I heard a grunt that turned to a gasp, the sliding of a body along the phone booth wall, a thump, and the awful lonely knocking of a phone receiver, swinging, unheld.

I hung up and dialed Headquarters right away.

WHEN I got to the Horseshoe, it was teeming with cops, prowl cars askew at the curb, and a crowd already collected. I shoved through, got sass from a young cop, returned the sass but softly, explained who I was, and he ushered me in to Louis Parker, hat on back of his head, busy with details.

"You again?" Louis said without enthusiasm.

The young cop saluted. "He said he knows you, Lieutenant."

"Okay, okay," Louis said impatiently.

"Yes, sir," said the cop, saluting again, but not quite as smartly. He turned and went back into the street.

"This is a new wrinkle," Louis said. "I can't get called into a case without running into you."

"I called you, Louis."

"How's that?"

"I called you."

"You called me?" He was suddenly interested. His hat moved forward on his head. "How come?"

"I was talking to Hines when the shooting started."

"You mean you were here?"

"On the phone."

"How come?"

"He called me. At home?"

"What about?"

"Something," I said, "about collecting fifteen thousand dollars that Joe Malamed owed him."

"We found an I.O.U. in his wallet for that amount; from Malamed,

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to him. You mean he was going to retain you to try to collect dough for him?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"What time was it?"

"About five to twelve. How'd he get it, Louis?"

"A forty-five. Three bullets."

"Trace the gun yet, Louis?"

"We just got here, for God's sake. Furthermore, there ain't no gun. Nobody kindly left a gun."

"I don't mean this gun. I mean the one that got Joe Malamed?"

He came very close to me. The hat went back on his head. He said very quietly: "What the hell is this extraordinary interest in our tracing that gun?"

"Just asking, Lieutenant."

"I don't believe you. What's that gun got to do with you?"

"Nothing, Louis."

"Something's tickling you about that gun, Pete. You want to tell me?"

"Nothing's tickling, Louis."

"Okay. Anything else you want to tell me? About this one here. This Frankie Hines."

"There's nothing else I know."

His face tightened. "I doubt that." Then he said: "Okay. Blow. I don't need you around here. I got work."

I blew. I walked across town and up to the Long-Malamed. The bar was loaded three deep. I gave my hat and coat to Irene and she returned a small wolf-whistle.

"Real handsome tonight! And all

dressed up in the blue serge, and all."

Customers with coats interrupted us.

"See you," I said.

I called for my drink to Tobias, and it was handed to me in a relay of three bar-flies. The third was Charles Morse.

"Nothing like a murder to stimulate business," he said. "Is there?"

"Nope." I took my drink. "What are you doing out here?"

"Can't get in back there. They're capacity."

I could hear Ruth Benson singing in the inner room.

"She almost finished?" I asked.

He listened. "Yes. This is her last song." He smiled. Sadly. "I know the routines here pretty well." He raised his glass. "Skoal."

We both drank.

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"Melvin Long here?" I asked.

"He's somewhere in the rear."

"And Mrs. Malamed?"

"She was called downtown. Further police questioning. Those details never end."

"Lieutenant Parker?"

He shook his head. "This time it's the D.A.'s office."

"I want to talk with her myself, though, between you and me, I don't think she loves me overly. I want to talk with you some more too, and with Ruth Benson, and Melvin Long"—I looked about—"but this is no place to talk."

"Here she is now."

Ruth Benson came through to the cocktail lounge. She was tall and very dark, with a rich warm skin, an oval face, black up-tilted eyes, and black hair worn in a braid like a crown over her head.

"Excuse me," I said. I went to her "Miss Benson?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Peter Chambers, I'm a private detective."

"So?"

"I've been retained on that Joe Malamed thing. Can I talk with you?"

"Of course."

"Can you get out for a few minutes?"

"I don't understand."

"If we could go somewhere where it's a little quieter."

"Oh, Yes. If you wish."

She had a flat monotonous controlled voice. You couldn't tell what she was thinking from the way she talked. You couldn't tell from her expression either. Make-up covered her face like a tarpaulin over a rainy infield. Her cheeks were smooth, powdered brown, her full lips were dark red with a purple cast, her eyelashes were long and heavy, and there was a shining dark cream over the lids. There were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

She sat, "Excuse me. I'll be with you in a moment."

She disappeared, and came back with a wrap. I decided to forego my hat and coat. I took her arm and we moved toward the door. Irene threw me a look that could kill at fifty paces, but I ducked.

I pushed open the door, and the doorman opened a cab door for us. We went to Pete and Jerry's Patch on Fifty-seventh where it was quiet and we could talk. We took a back table. I ordered scotch and water. She ordered a double stinger. She removed her wrap. Her off-the-shoulder dress was of black satin, cut deep. Her shoulders were smooth and dark and her arms were slender but round.

She leaned toward me. Her breasts were almost completely exposed, full and smooth and dark, and heaving.

"What is it, Mr. Chambers? What can I do for you?"

"I don't know. Yet. But, I'll come right to the point."

"Please do."

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"You know that I'm investigating Malamed's murder."

"So you told me."

"Two things, Miss Benson. If you don't want to answer, you can tell me to go fly a kite."

The waiter brought the drinks. She drank hers quickly.

"Two things, Mr. Chambers?"

"First, I've been informed that Joe Malamed recently purchased a mink coat. For you. Second, I heard that Malamed and Melvin Long had an argument. About you. Want to talk about any of that?"

Again she drank of the stinger. "Yes."

"Fine. Did you accept a mink coat from Malamed?"

"Yes."

"His wife know about this?"

"I don't think so."

"Want to talk more about it?"

"Yes, I do." She finished the drink, pushed the glass away. "I loved Joe Malamed."

I wove an aimless design of wet circles on the table with the bottom of my glass.

She said. "I know what you're thinking. I met Joe before he was married, in Miami. I went for him, hook, line and sinker. He went for me too. It was hot and heavy for a while, and then he met Claire.

She came down as part of a chorus line, a cute kid from a rather good family. He made a big play for her. When I saw the way it was, I quit—I was working in his club at the time. I went to Paris. When I got back to New York, they were married, and he'd bought the Long-Malamed with Melvin."

"And how was it between you, then, when you returned?"

"Bad as ever. Really just as bad."

"Even though he was married?"

She cried peculiarly. Her eyes were shaped so that the inside corners pointed downward. The tears were wet straight lines down her nose.

"I loved Joe Malamed. And he loved me. I've been around a long time, Mr. Chambers. Joe was a complex man. It is very possible that he was deeply in love with Claire too. She's much younger than I am, and a far different type. I won't even say I was jealous."

She paused and took a deep breath. "Maybe I've been around too long, but there's one thing I've learned in life. You can't have it all. Of anything. I loved Joe Malamed, and Joe loved me, and that was that, period."

I gave her my handkerchief and she dabbed at her face.

I said, "Do you think Claire knew?"

"I don't think so. I wouldn't care if she did. But I don't think so. Joe was too smart for that and, in a way, too kind."

"Do you think she loved him?"

"I wouldn't know. Really, I wasn't interested."

"But—I mean—the guy's wife."

"The moral aspects are beyond

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me. Claire Malamed was something away, outside. Joe Malamed was for me, and whatever he did, he did—I couldn't cut Joe away from me any more than I could cut my head off. If you disapprove, I don't give a damn. I'm giving you the facts, and I don't care how you feel about them. I'm telling you because it might help. I've never been vengeful, but whoever killed Joe Malamed—I want that person dead. I'd do it myself."

"I understand."

"I'm glad I'm working. I'm glad I can come in there and sing. I'd go crazy if I didn't. Working and . . ." She looked at the empty cocktail glass.

I waved to the waiter for refills.

"And Melvin Long? His argument with Malamed?"

"Oh, that. He's in love with me."

"Melvin?"

She sipped again, set the glass down.

"Melvin. I could be his mother. I don't mean in years—but I could be his mother. A sweet, spoiled kid."

"Did Joe know?"

"He thought it was funny."

"Then why the argument?"

"Melvin had told Joe that I had been at his apartment. That riled Joe, for a minute, and they had words. Joe forgot it, fast."

"Joe threatened him. He was heard threatening him."

"Maybe he did. He might have told him he'd knock his teeth in, something like that, but I bet he forgot it ten minutes later."

"Did you know Frank Hines?"

"Yes."

"Did you know that Joe owed Frankie fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Joe never welshed on a debt in his life."

"He was in the process of welshing on Frankie."

"That's a lie."

"Easy, Miss Benson. I happen to know that he owed Frankie the money, and that he was stalling on paying. And he could afford to pay."

"Right, Mr. Chambers. Right on both counts."

"Yet you say he never welshed a debt in his life?"

"Right, there, too."

"Is that supposed to make sense?" I asked.

"You bet your life. Joe was down there, on a vacation, playing horses at Tropical. Joe was a bit bettor, never threw it into the machines. He'd sit in the clubhouse and make last minute bets with a bookmaker. It would be too late to go into the machines to knock the price down. Many big bettors operate like that."

"I know that they do."

"He went for about sixty thousand dollars."

"What's that got to do with Frankie Hines?"

"Frankie was touting him."

"What does that mean?"

"Lots of big gamblers don't

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know too much about horses. They get a guy they trust, who knows the game, and they depend on his advice."

"I know that too."

"Frankie recommended the bookmaker."

"What's that got to do with Frankie's fifteen thousand?"

"Joe lost sixty thousand dollars. Then he borrowed fifteen from Frankie and he lost that too. That was enough. He had it. He came back north. Back here, a syndicate slob straightened him out, told him he'd been taken."

"How?"

"Frankie's bookmaker was a nobody, big flash, no protection, no organization. A shill. He and Frankie played footsie. They took Joe. Frankie gave Joe bum steers, Joe bet the bookmaker, and Frankie and the bookmaker split Joe's losings."

"How do you know all this?"

"Did you ever hear of Three-fingered Gray?"

"Yeah. Boss man in Miami."

"He's been sick. An old friend of Joe's. He's holed up in an estate in Orlando. Joe sent me down to Gray with the whole story. The bookmaker's name—the shill—is Sylvan Dell. Gray hauled him in. The guy spilled his story. Gray was coming up here to see doctors. He was bringing Dell with him. They were due here this week. That's why Joe was stalling Frankie Hines. He didn't want to tip his hand until he could face him with this Sylvan Dell."

"I understand," I said. "Fully."

I sat back and drank scotch. She had stopped crying. She returned my handkerchief. The waiter came up and I paid the check. She had some stinger left, and she killed that. I had no scotch.

I said. "Just one little bit more, please."

"Sure."

"You said that Melvin had told Joe you were at his apartment. Was that true?"

"Yes, it was."

"Do you want to tell me about that?"

"Of course. The kid was beginning to give me a hard time, pawing around. I had to set him straight, but it was tough to do, working in the club. One night, last week, we had a few drinks together, and he asked me to come over to his place. I accepted, because I wanted to flatten that out once and for all. He's got a beautiful place, way up, overlooking the park. We had a few more drinks up there, and then he started making with the pitch out on the terrace. I stopped him, and I told him off."

"How'd he take it?"

"Not too good. He was practically feeling no pain at the time. He got crazy-eyed, you know, all melodramatic. All of a sudden, he runs inside and comes back with a gun. Now he's going to kill himself, finish it off. You know these kids

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when they've got one too many in them. I talked him down, easy-like, and finally, I took the gun away from him. I never handled one of them in my life. I'm moving away from him, holding it, when all of a sudden, I must have touched something wrong. It went off."

"Anybody hurt?"

"I thought so for a moment."

"Why?"

"He dropped. I thought I'd shot him. I bent over him, and he was out, cold. I looked for blood, something, but he wasn't hurt. He'd just plain fainted, and me with that thing in my hand. I ran inside, put the gun in a drawer somewhere, under some things, and I brought out water. Nothing helped. I almost drowned him. He stayed out. Then I tried brandy. Finally—I must have poured a ton of brandy down his throat—he came to."

"He's got a phobia about guns."

"You're telling me." She looked at her watch. "I've got to get back. Is there anything else? Anything at all?"

"Nothing," I said. And then, without looking at her, scrunching up from the table, I said, "I'm sorry about Joe, real sorry, Miss Benson."

THE LONG-MALAMED was still crowded. Ruth Benson went directly to the back room. Irene Whitney made a face at me, but there was something extra-special in the face. Could be my excursion with Ruth Benson was going to do me more good with Irene than with the murder of Joe Malamed.

I pushed through to Tobias. I said, "Where's Morse?"

"Got a seat inside."

"Mrs. Malamed?"

"Still downtown."

"Melvin?"

"Here I am," Melvin said, touching my shoulder.

"Can we go upstairs, you and I, where we can talk?"

"Sure."

"Just a minute." I leaned over to Tobias. "When you get a chance, and you get a free waiter, tell Morse I'm upstairs with Melvin, to come up and join us."

"Okay, Mr. Chambers."

Melvin took me upstairs to the room that had been Joe Malamed's. It was an all-male room, with a fireplace, and heavy oak furniture.

"Melvin," I said. "Why didn't you tell me there was trouble between you and Joe Malamed?"

"It wouldn't have helped. In finding your murderer."

"Wouldn't it? And why didn't you tell me about Ruth Benson?"

"Now, look, Mr. Chambers—"

"Why didn't you tell me, Melvin? You hired me. You must have figured me for a pretty smart guy. You must have figured I'd find out. Why didn't you tell me, Melvin?"

"Because it was none of your business, that's why."

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"Wasn't it?"

"If I thought it would be of any help, I'd have told you. I don't believe in washing dirty linen in public." His face got creased up and his fidgety fingers came out shaking. "Look, Mr. Chambers, I didn't kill Joe Malamed."

From the doorway, Charles Morse said: "They want you downstairs, Mr. Long."

Melvin's hands dropped to his sides; and he looked toward me. "Is it all right?"

"Sure, Melvin."

His head swivelled from me to Morse to me, and then he turned and walked out quickly.

Morse dropped into an easy chair near the door. "I heard, Mr. Chambers."

"Heard what?"

"His denial. Didn't you accuse him of murder?"

"Nope," I said. "I'm accusing you."

"I beg your pardon."

"I'm accusing you. Of the murder of Joe Malamed."

He squinted at me a moment, and smiled. He had his ivory holder out. He dropped it back in his pocket and stood up.

"Is this some new method of questioning?"

"Nope. It's a statement of fact."

"I murdered Joe Malamed?"

"That's right."

"You'd better tell me what's on your mind, Chambers," he said, quietly.

I wondered whether he was wearing a gun, but it was too late now for wonder.

"One group," I said, "at one table, could have killed Joe Malamed. Someone of that group. You know that?"

"Very well. I also know that unless you can prove beyond a reasonable doubt *which* one at that table did so, legally, there's no case."

"I'll proceed to do so."

"You have my rapt attention, Mr. Chambers."

I moved close, close enough in case of action. "At the table, we have Ruth Benson, Frankie Hines, Melvin Long, Claire Malamed, and you."

"So far, so good."

"We'll first eliminate Ruth Benson."

"Why?"

"Because she was wholly, completely and irrevocably in love with Joe Malamed. She'd have rather killed herself than him. Agreed?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"We'll eliminate, next, Frankie Hines."

"Why?"

"Because he's dead, killed by the same one that killed Malamed."

"I can't accept that, or—shall we say—I accept it with reservations."

"Next we eliminate Melvin Long. Because he has a phobia about guns. His statements to that

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effect have been positively corroborated by one whose paramount interest is the death of the killer. Whom does that leave, Mr. Morse?"

The smile was still there.

"According to you—Claire Malamed and myself."

"Very good, Mr. Morse. You have an orderly mind."

Then I made my first move to obliterate his smile. I dipped into my pocket and brought up the gold medal I had rescued from Claire Malamed's treasure chest. It worked. The smile went away and never came back. A vein in his temple began to dance.

I held up the gold medal. It glinted in the light.

"The police," I said, "have been busy working on routine. Sooner or later, it will come to them. Whoever killed Joe Malamed had to be an expert marksman. One shot, remember, from the inner room. One little bullet, and *wham*—Joe Malamed was dead, a bullet through his temple. So . . . our quarry is an expert marksman."

"What do you have in your hand?"

"A medal for marksmanship. Target Club Competition. Awarded to C.M. This was found in Claire Malamed's jewel box."

He was beginning to squirm. "Even if true, that would involve Claire Malamed, not me."

"Uh uh," I said. "Claire Malamed knows nothing about guns. She tried to pop me with an automatic, and didn't even know enough to spring the safety catch. Your initials are C.M., Mr. Morse. You won this medal. It won't take much investigation to prove that. You're our marksman, pal. There isn't another one at that table that could shoot a gun that expertly. The cops will come to it soon enough, and then you're it, Mr. Morse. You're double it."

"And so far this has been your own, solitary venture?"

"So far, but not for long."

"Thanks," he said. He flipped open his jacket. He wore a belt holster. A large forty-five, competently held, looked at me. I looked back at it.

"It's pleasant to know." he said, "that no one else, so far, has come to these conclusions. Perhaps no one else will, without prompting from you. And I'll do what I can, within reason of course, to prevent you from prompting."

"Easy, pal," I said. "Would you like me to go on, or would you like to finish off the prompter, promptly? I'd suggest you wait for Calvin and his drums. He does pretty good to screen off the sound of a shot."

"Sure," he said pleasantly. "Go ahead. I'm not really worried about screening shots this time. We had a talk and split up, and I doubled back and found you sneaking around here, and you got tough, and I used a gun for which I have a

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perfectly valid license. Mrs. Malamed will verify the fact that you've been sneaking around before."

"Who's going to make the speeches, pal—you or me?"

"You. For the nonce."

"Okay. The medal. Rather valuable. You gave it to Mrs. Malamed."

"Why?"

"Token of affection. Like a fraternity pin, or Air Force wings. You two are—how do they say it? —thataway."

"How do you know that?"

"We'll come to it. Let's finish one murder first. With Malamed dead, Mrs. Malamed inherits plenty, and she cashes a two hundred thousand dollar policy. Pretty good?"

"Good, indeed."

"So you plan it carefully. Gloves and stuff. Darkness, wild lights, Calvin Cole's drums. You're even smart enough to plant the gun in your own coat pocket, just in case any latent fingerprints can be developed."

"Pretty smart yourself."

"It began to come clear to me," I said, "when Frankie Hines told me he had a hunch about the killer. But he wouldn't talk. Want to know why?"

"I'm dying to know why."

"He said he had an investment to protect. Investment. Fifteen thousand dollars that Joe owed him. Now, who would he go to for the protection of this investment? Who, Mr. Morse?"

Silence. Silence, and a black gun, and pale steady eyes.

"One person," I said. "Only one. Claire Malamed. Who else? Then he said he was going to make one last pitch for it tonight. And he added, quote: 'If I don't get it—stand by for a load of information that he could use as a crowbar to pry loose fifteen G's? Stack that up against a heavy gold medal that little Claire treasures in her jewel box. C.M. Claire Malamed. Also, Charles Morse. It figured. He was a nosy little guy. He knew about Claire's extra-marital romance. He knew about Claire and you. So he came to her. He said for her to pay up—and he'd shut up."

"Blackmail." Charles Morse made his first impulsive, involuntary statement of the night. "If she paid him once—it would never end."

"Of course. So you followed him back to his eatery, and you let him have it. Probably out of the same forty-five you're holding now. You're supposed to get rid of that, Mr. Morse."

"Right now," he said, "it's safest with me. There are numbers and things to be filed off before disposing of it. Please remember, this was an emergency usage."

I grinned, suddenly, and I thumbed my nose. "Got you, pal."

"Got *me*?"

"Sure. You can't use the gun

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you're holding, no matter how much you want to. It'd tie you right up to Frankie's murder. Work your way out of that one, book critic."

I had thrown him a curve and it confused him. He wavered. For just one instant. I had inched my way near enough to take advantage of that one instant. After all, I'm in the business. I hit his gun hand with my left and I hit his jaw with my right. The left worked. The gun splattered to the floor.

I waved the left again, big in his face, and as he ducked, the right caught him, good this time, flush on the mouth. He went down, spluttering blood. I reached for the gun—and looked up to Mrs. Claire Malamed, mink coat and all, in the doorway.

"What . . . ?" she said.

"Downstairs, lady. You and your beautiful boy friend."

The Long-Malamed's cocktail lounge buzzed when I herded them down the white marble stairs in front of Charles Morse's ugly black forty-five."

ERNIE SCHMATTOLA'S was seething with people. I was seated thigh-close to Irene Whitney and many teacups had come and gone at our table. Suddenly, she turned and kissed me square on the lips.

"The hell with Yale," she said, "You win. Three cheers for you."

Louis Parker, across the table, cleared his throat.

"Getting back to this pistol."

"Gimme," I said. "I'm dying to see what's so tough to trace."

Louis handed the gleaming nickel-plated pearl-handled thirty-eight revolver to me. He said, "Every possible mark of identification has been filed off. *You* trace it."

"I'm certain I can give you the name and address of the gun's owner within a half hour," I said.

"Bet?"

"Yes. A dinner at the Four Seasons for Irene—Miss Whitney—and myself, against my contribution of one thousand dollars to the P.A.L."

"Done," Parker said.

At this percise moment, Melvin Long came roaring down Schmattola's aisle.

"Mr. Chambers," he called.

He stood over us, his grin so wide it lifted his ears. "I found it! Stuck away in the bureau drawer beneath my shirts."

"Found what, Mel?" I asked.

"This." He fumbled in his coat pocket and laid a twin to the nickel-plated job beside the other. There was silence for a long moment.

"And don't worry, Mr. Chambers. Don't worry about the fee. You certainly earned it."

"The fee," I said, "I've just lost, Mel."

No fee. But could I kick? I felt the pressure of Irene's thigh again, and I decided, why hell, no, I couldn't kick.

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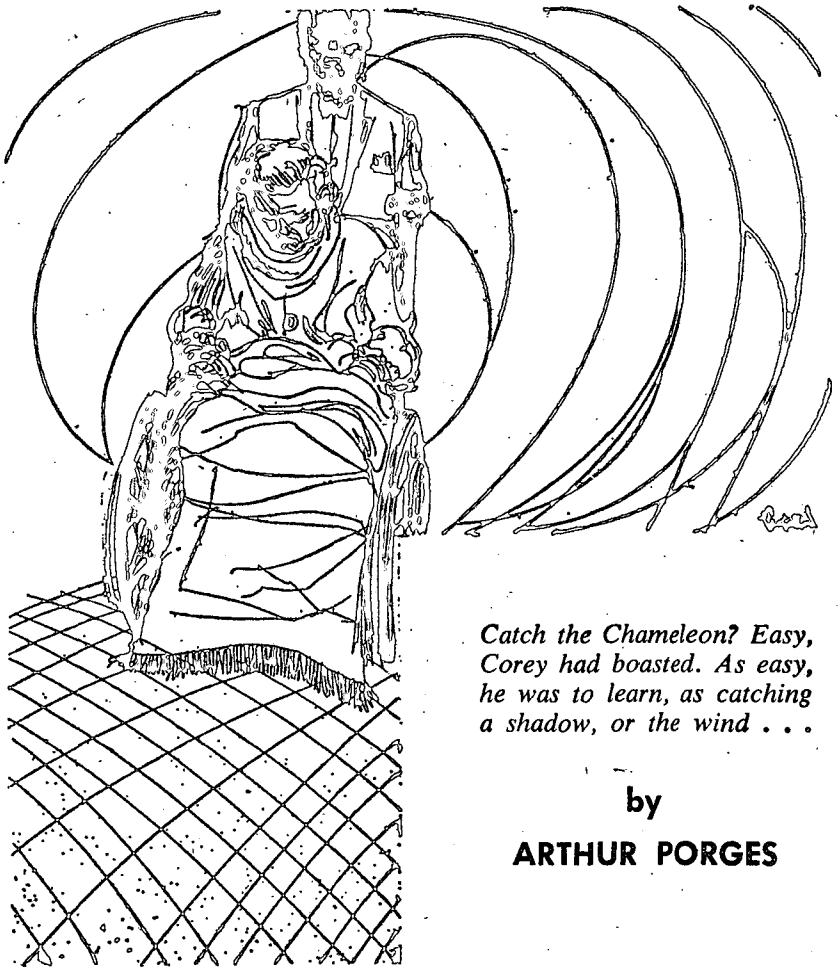

Catch the Chameleon? Easy, Corey had boasted. As easy, he was to learn, as catching a shadow, or the wind . . .

by

ARTHUR PORGES

Again the Chameleon

As he spoke, Lieutenant Corey's voice suggested pride in the American criminal class—a paradoxical attitude, since he was a detective dedicated to putting bigger and better bars between that class and the public. He said:

"This Chameleon may be hot stuff in France, but over here we're used to smart crooks. The more

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money, the more suckers, the more and sharper crooks. There's so much stuff worth stealing in this country, we're bound to have smarter crooks."

"Then you expect to nab the Chameleon?"

"If he's fool enough to get into the Olympic Hotel tonight and snatch that painting, we'll nab him, all right," Corey said. "You reporters know my record. Have I ever goofed?"

Dick Winton gave him a quizzical glance.

"Always a first time. The Chameleon has spoiled some good records. There was Rameau in France; Diekmann in Germany; Pirolo in Italy—"

"Good men," the lieutenant admitted, his manner patronizing. "But too close to the problem. Besides, they have funny rules in Europe. Here, we don't mess around doing things by a book Napoleon or somebody wrote a hundred years ago. The hotel's surrounded—every entrance; the lower windows; the roof; the fire escapes."

"We'll let him in—we want him in. In fact, we're going to let him take the painting right from the Baron's wall, and maybe even get to the elevator."

Winton whistled softly.

"Isn't that risky?"

"Not a bit." Corey was complacent. "We make him play our way instead of his. If we guard the Baron's room too well, the Chameleon will back off and try someplace else, maybe out of my jurisdiction. And I want him!"

"Does the Baron like being bait?"

"No, but I convinced him it's better to deal with the thief here and now, on our terms, than for the Baron always to be wondering when the grab will be made."

"But he won't lock the painting up, has to have it on every hotel wall wherever he goes," the reporter said. "I can't figure people like that."

"You'd be more puzzled if you saw the fool thing," Corey growled. "One of those modern paintings, all blobs and smears in crazy color—gas gangrene, it looks like to me!"

"It's worth two hundred thousand dollars, they say," Winton reminded him. "Those blobs and smears come high." He stirred in the cruiser's seat, thinking unhappily of his own salary. Then he stiffened. "Hey, look at all those guys pouring into the hotel! What goes on?"

Corey was equally surprised. He called to one of his men, who trotted over, and told him to find out the score. The cop came back a few minutes later, fighting unsuccessfully to suppress a grin.

"What's the joke?" Corey demanded.

"Of all the times—" the man said. "Know who those guys are?

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Some kind of club—Six Foot Plus Club! They're having a convention there tonight."

"Why didn't the manager tell me?"

"I asked him, and he said he didn't see how that mattered."

"Boy, he's a big help!" Corey said bitterly. "We're after a man six feet four inches tall, and now the Olympic's full of 'em. Not that it matters," he added, his voice grim. "Once that painting's off the wall, even the club president will need to be identified by J. Edgar Hoover to get out. Still, I'd better have a word with them."

He got out of the cruiser, followed by Winton, and went into the lobby. After a brief conversation with the manager, who looked distinctly crestfallen, Corey strode over to a group of giants at the bar. From his own insignificant five-eleven-and-a-half, he glared up at a lean man who topped him by at least six inches.

"You're Baker, in charge of this bunch?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

The lieutenant flashed his badge.

"Police. How'd you happen to pick the Olympic tonight?"

Baker blinked, then a slow grin displayed his white teeth.

"I might've known," he said softly.

"Known what?" Corey was impatient.

"Some joker invited us here a week ago; said everything was paid for." Then he looked bewildered. "The manager confirmed it just now. I don't understand—"

"I do," the lieutenant snapped. He turned to Winton. "One of the Chameleon's tricks. Thinks if he fills the hotel with king-size decoys we won't get him. But he's wrong. Easy to get in, but getting out's another story. When I get word the painting's been taken—"

"You're leaving it completely unguarded?" Winton asked in wonder.

"Painting, yes. Room, yes. Corridor, yes. Even floor. But let him try stairs or elevator." His cold eyes bored into the reporter's. "The Chameleon works by disguise, plus magician's tricks. Those European cops played it too close, too tight. To get somebody like this Boussinesq—that's his name, actually—you have to open up, give him a little rope. That's what I'm doing, and I'll nail him. He wrote to say he's taking that painting tonight. That's how he works; has to brag and strut. Well, I'll let him get

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his big, hot paws on it, then, *zowie!* we lower the boom."

The manager came over hurriedly.

"Lieutenant. On the phone; it's urgent."

Corey moved fast. Like a hunting cat, he snatched up the phone.

"Officer," a thin, bleating voice said, "this is Marcel—of the dress salon on the eighth floor. I just saw something in the corridor—just a glimpse—but the manager thinks you should know."

"Then tell me!" Corey gritted. "Get to the point, man!"

"There was a wheelchair, with an old lady, wheeled by a Negro. At least, it looked like an old lady, but I saw her—him—lift the skirt. Long, hairy legs stuck down in holes in the chair. So you see—"

"Never mind. That's enough. Thanks," Corey blurted out. He turned to Winton with a wry smile. "Working true to form. Thinks he'll get by as an old lady in a wheelchair. Using that trick of lowering his feet again; not too bright. Must be getting old, the Chameleon!"

A policeman ran up.

"He did it, Lieutenant. The painting's gone; Sullivan just checked."

Corey's eyes were glittering like crumbs of glass.

"Pass the word, Larsen," he ordered. "Get this to every man on guard. Old lady in wheelchair; she's our man. Don't let him by, no matter what happens."

The cop scurried off.

"I oughta clear this lobby," Corey muttered. "It's gonna look like a Chinese fire drill when the action starts. But that might be worse—" His voice died away querulously, so that Winton leaned closer.

Suddenly there were yells outside; brakes squealed, and a woman screamed. The sounds rose to a crescendo of excitement.

"What the devil—" Corey began, when another of his men burst into the lobby, spotted the lieutenant, and ran over.

"What's happening?" Corey demanded.

"Money!" the man panted. "Some joker dropped about a million five dollar bills from some window. The street's a madhouse. They're pushing our men off post; the traffic's tied up in knots. I tell you, Lieutenant—"

"Corey!" somebody yelled. "Heads up!"

The lieutenant whirled, hand on his gun. Up on the mezzanine a wheelchair had appeared; in it, an old lady sat, apparently dozing. A tall Negro in a white smock had his hand on the back of the chair.

"Up there!" Corey yelled. "Get that woman in the chair; it's the Chameleon!"

Immediately at least a dozen men were charging up the stairs to the mezzanine. As they came near, guns waving, the attendant gave a choked howl of terror, and bolted.

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He started back into the corridor, saw other men coming that way, too, and in pure panic did what a terrified rhino might have—ploughed through the police, and abandoned his patient.

"Never mind him!" Corey bellowed. "Get her!"

For the chair, still rolling from the attendant's last shove, was about to topple down the stairs. But two men caught it in time.

When Corey joined them, they were looking incredulously at a mannikin, carefully made up so that instead of being young and pretty, it was old and wrinkled, but still quite inanimate.

Corey stood there, throat working, eyes wild.

"The attendant! That Negro—the Chameleon!"

He ran to the door, followed by Winton and a straggling group of bewildered police. Outside there was still bedlam, with Corey's men being hustled and shouldered aside.

There was no sign of the attendant. Few remembered now how tall and thin he was, because of the way he had crouched and cringed before running.

"Well," Winton told his editor later. "He must have had the painting wrapped around him, in the usual way of such thieves. What with the fuss outside, he got his money's worth for a few thousand in fives. With Corey's orders about the old lady, it was easy for him to get through."

"How about that phone call?" the editor asked.

"That was the Chameleon, naturally. Corey should have known; Marcel always closes at five. Besides, who could see hairy legs with the Chameleon himself pushing the chair? That nonsense was just to make poor Corey kick himself later; a final turn of the screw. Like asking some busy grocer for two tens for a five—quick!

"Another thing," Winton added hastily. "Insult to injury. The mannikin was Marcel's. The Chameleon's a whiz at make-up and disguise. He not only made himself into a Negro—and it wasn't just color; no minstrel stuff. That man lives a part. But not only himself, as I was about to say, but the mannikin too; expert job. She looked more alive as an old lady than as a girl, somehow. The men who grabbed her were the most surprised bunch you ever saw."

"Good timing, I'd say," the editor said. "I suppose he took the painting, made the call immediately, dropped that money, and then scooted for the mezzanine, knowing that's where they'd be waiting—there and the main floor."

"That's how I figure it," Winton said. "I'd like to give Corey a break, but he sawed the limb off behind him. Too many people heard him promise too much. That Chameleon! Disguise and misdirection. I wonder—will they *ever* get him!"

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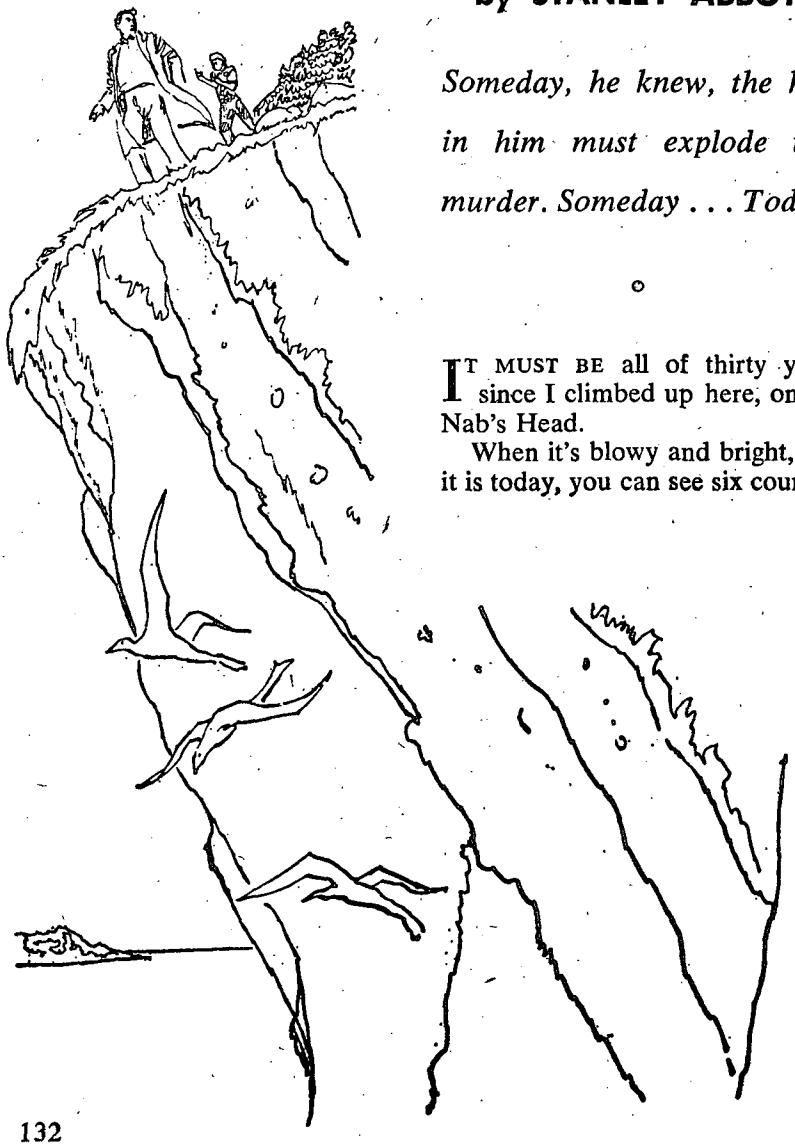
"Isn't That Something?"

by STANLEY ABBOTT



Someday, he knew, the hate in him must explode into murder. Someday . . . Today?

o

IT MUST BE all of thirty years since I climbed up here, on the Nab's Head.

When it's blowy and bright, like it is today, you can see six counties

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and the coast of France, and the thunder of the sea on the rocks seven hundred feet below comes muted.

I flew over from Cincinnati yesterday to bury my old lady. The old man died last year. Think of it—fifty-three years married and happy too. And this morning, leaving the cemetery, I happened to look up at the Nab. I'd climbed it often as a kid.

Why not have a go, I thought—you won't be coming over to England again.

It's not much of a climb really—there's a steep path skirting the edge of the cliff all the way to the top—but to hear them talk in Barnsea you'd think it was Everest. Anyway, nothing seems to have changed. The gulls are all wheeling and screaming and the kittiwakes swooping low to look at me, just like the last time I was up here.

Harry Borden was with me then. Always the show-off, he had to go and stand on the edge. I can see him now, striking a pose with an arm outstretched pointing to the west and declaiming like a ham actor, "There she lies, kid—three thousand miles across the glittering seas. America the beautiful—and you can have her!"

He was about forty then and I was just seventeen and he knew I didn't like what he said, or him calling me 'kid,' but he did it just the same.

I hadn't known him long. He'd been at school with my dad and had just come back from America, loaded with money, as everybody thought. I met him when Dad brought him home, after finding him in the Queen's Arms in Barnsea, treating the house.

And the moment he walked in the door, followed by my dad and stinking of whisky and cheap cigars, I knew he was after my mom.

He put a hand up in front of his eyes and pretended to reel at the sight of her. She'd red hair and a lovely milk white skin.

"Why didn't you warn me, Ernie," he cried, taking her hand in both of his, and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss her.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Bailey," he said in a sonorous voice. "I was unprepared for such beauty."

Mom was laughing and blushing and her eyes were all alight. And Dad was beaming as though he'd just won the Irish Sweep. It nearly made me sick.

While Mom went to fetch the glasses, Harry Borden walked round the living room, laughing loudly and admiring everything. He was taller than Dad, with wavy black hair and a lot of white teeth; his clothes were loud and sporty.

Mom came back with the glasses and Dad said, "How about a brown ale, Harry?"

"Brown ale," he roared. "By God, that takes me back. But not tonight, Ernie. This is an occasion."

He reached in his jacket and

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came out with a gleaming flask that looked to be a foot long. Mom and I were drinking shandies. He filled Dad's glass. "Try that on for size."

He turned to me, grinning. "How about you, kid? Like to try it?"

"Oh no, Mr. Borden, please," Mom jumped in before I could say a word. "Bill's only allowed to drink shandy-gaff."

I wouldn't have tried it even if I'd wanted to. I don't like being called kid and I didn't like him.

"Shandy-gaff?" he repeated.

"It's beer and ginger beer, Mr. Borden," Mom said.

"Of course. I remember. Never could stand the stuff."

He leaned across, smiling into her eyes, "Anyway, how about you calling me Harry and me calling you Ethel?"

I saw a blush starting up Mom's face. She didn't know what to do. She'd never met anyone like him. Barnsea's a quiet little town and Mom's a Barnsea girl. She'd never even been up to London.

Dad came to her rescue. "It's all right, Ethel," he said. "Harry's my oldest friend. That's the way they do things in America."

"That's one thing you can say about the States, Ernie, they're friendly people. Come right out and call you by your first name the moment they meet you. No messing about."

He refilled the glasses from the big flask before they were empty.

"Well, here's to beauty," he said, lifting his glass and giving Mom a look that made her lower her eyes and say she had something in the oven.

Then Dad started with, "D'you remember this.—" and Harry countered with, "D'you remember that—" Right back to their school-days they went—you never heard such boring stuff. But they laughed with the tears streaming down their faces, and I stayed and listened because I wanted to hear him talk about America. I'd been dreaming about it since I was ten.

At last Dad asked him what he'd been doing out there. And for an hour or more he told us of fortunes made and lost in oil, cattle and a lot of things I can't remember. It seems there was hardly a thing he hadn't been in. But always something had happened: the well fell in, the cattle lay down and died, or his partners were thieves.

Mom, who'd been drinking it all in, said, "Oh, how dreadful, Mr.—Harry," she corrected herself.

He gave her a big smile.

"But you can't keep a good man down, Ethel. That's what I always say. I've come back with some great ideas—ideas that'll go big over here. And all, a big idea needs is a big guy to go with it," and he roared with laughter. Dad roared too. But I didn't think it funny.

Of course he stayed to supper. In fact, he stayed to supper for nearly a month. He'd taken a room

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over the Queen's Arms down in Barnsea and he'd come up to our house nearly every evening. Dad was traveling for Alsop's Rainwear and was away usually a couple of nights a week and sometimes a week-end.

He told Harry to make free with the house and he did. Mom liked him around too.

I was taking a correspondence course in journalism and stayed in my room most of the time. I'd hear them laughing and joking in the living room. I didn't mind that, but what burned me was when he put a hand on my mom. I caught him at it a couple of times in the kitchen when he'd be helping her with the dishes.

Even in front of Dad he'd put an arm round her, making it look all affectionate and natural like, and Dad would just grin. He liked a warm atmosphere around the house and treated Harry like he was an older brother or something. But I knew what he was up to, and I made up my mind to keep an eye on him.

Sometimes when Dad was away Harry'd take Mom to the movies and when they'd get back late I'd be in bed. I'd hear them laughing and talking and that was all right, but when there was silence I'd get up and go to the bathroom.—the number of times I went to the bathroom that month—or I'd go through to the kitchen for something. It must have got him hopping mad; anyway, pretty soon I'd hear him leave.

If it hadn't been for him making passes at Mom and being such a blowhard he'd have been all right. I'd been to the movies with him a couple of times when he'd asked me and Mom had insisted. And sometimes I met him on the beach on a Saturday morning. I was training for the Barnsea team and Harry was keen on what he called "keeping in shape." I could leave him standing on the flat but going up the Nab it was hard to shake him. For his age he'd a lot of endurance.

We'd sit up there for a while, getting our wind, and I'd try to get him talking about America. But he hadn't a good word for it, so I gave up on that and decided that as soon as I could I'd find out for myself.

At first Harry went up to London two or three days a week. Then he stopped going, and I knew his big ideas had all blown up when I heard Dad telling him he'd speak to Mr. Alsop about a job. It looked like we were going to be stuck with him forever. Things had changed a lot with him around all the time or taking Mom out and I was fed up with it.

I missed the easy-going way Mom and Dad and I got on together, with lots of laughing and loving, if you know what I mean. We were always very close, the three of us.

Dad was never one to beat

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around the pubs and except for an occasional game of darts at the Queen's he was always home and the three of us had a fine time together. I've seen him give Mom a crack on the behind when she was bent over the stove and she'd act indignant then fall into his arms laughing and kissing. I wouldn't have swapped my home for anything. And I wanted it like it was before Harry Borden came on the scene.

Then one night, when I heard the front door and thought he'd left, I came out of my room to find him with an arm around Mom's waist. She was laughing and struggling but before I could do anything she broke away and pushed him out. I dashed back into my room and slammed the door. I heard his footsteps going down the street and I expected her to come in and say something but she didn't.

Next morning at breakfast she could see I was fed up for she asked me what was wrong. What could I say? Harry was Dad's best friend and Mom thought he had a halo. I didn't want to talk about it, but she said, "You know, you mustn't mind Harry. He's just an affectionate type and there's no harm in him."

She was smiling at me, trying to make me feel better. How could I tell her Dave Jones had seen him petting Ruby Tyler behind the Queen's Arms?—She's the barmaid, and as bold as they come. I couldn't, but I had to say something.

"Who are you kidding, Mom?"

"Don't talk like that," she said sharply. "You sound like an American gangster. It's those films; you go to too many."

Then she laughed in her easy-going way and said, "I'm sorry,"

and ruffled my hair and I got mad and flung out.

It wasn't that I blamed her, not one bit. I was big for seventeen and I'd been around a lot more than she ever had or knew, and I'd met Harry Borden's type. Mom wasn't simple, but she was a country girl and trusted everybody. She was flattered by him, that's what I figured, and couldn't see him for what he was. She didn't know it, but she was fair game to someone like Harry Borden.

I wondered if I should say something to my dad, but he was staying over that week-end in Gloucester and wouldn't be home till Wednesday.

Anyway, what would I say to him? "Look, Dad—Harry's fooling

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around with Mom." I know him.—He'd smile and look up at me in that quiet way of his—he's smaller than me—and he's so tolerant of everybody it gets me mad sometimes. "Don't take on so, son," he'd say. "Harry's a good chap even if he's a bit over-affectionate. We're all different, you know, and you've got to make allowances." That's my dad—good-natured, and always making allowances.

It was Friday night that Dave Jones told me Harry had hired a car for the week-end. He didn't have one himself. Dave works in Georgie Wood's garage opposite the Queen's Arms. I knew Harry was taking Mom to the Hippodrome in Brightham, because she'd told me they'd be back on the ten forty-five—that's the last train to Barnsea on a Saturday night. So what was he up to?

"What's he taking?" I asked Dave.

He grinned broadly. "The black Austin."

Dave and I had learned more about girls in the Austin than from all the books on physiology ever written.

"Georgie wanted four quid, midday Saturday to midday Sunday, but Harry said it wasn't worth more than three. And what d'you think Georgie said?—'if a skirt's worth three she's worth four,' and they split the difference."

Dave thought that was very funny, but I wheeled away in a flaming rage. I swear if I'd met Harry then I'd have bashed him.

I hardly slept a wink that night trying to figure out what to do. One thing I knew for certain: Harry wasn't spending money on a car for nothing when there was a train to come back on. And Mom wouldn't think anything of it; she'd just think it was nice and thoughtful of Harry.

But I knew what he was up to—Dave and I had done it before now—he'd run out of gas or have a breakdown and have to stay the night in Brightham. That was eighty miles away and nothing I could do about it. I wished Dad would come home suddenly but that wasn't likely. I even wished Harry would fall under a truck, but things like that don't happen when you want them to.

I thought of calling Dad in Gloucester, but that wouldn't do any good. And what would I say? Anyway, I didn't know where he was staying and I couldn't ask Mom. All I knew was someone had to look after her.

Why couldn't I go with them, I thought suddenly. Why couldn't I just get in the car when he came around to pick up Mom? If he tried to throw me out, that would be fine too—I was nearly as big as he was and that didn't worry me. I wouldn't budge and they'd have to take me with them. I knew Mom wouldn't mind when she got used to the idea, and I could pay my own way into the Hippodrome.

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I was tired when I got up next morning but I put on my running things and went down to the beach. Harry was there in flannels and a bulky sweater, doing push-ups.

"Hi there, kid," he shouted, "how about a real workout? Along the beach, then straight up the Nab."

I didn't feel like it. I'd planned just to do some fast sprints but he was so full of himself I said all right.

I left him on the flat and was first on the steep path up the cliff, but I could hear him close behind me. Halfway up he drew level and try as hard as I could I couldn't shake him.

It was all I could do to hold him to the top. We flung ourselves down panting until we'd got our wind.

It was a beautiful day, blowy and bright, and the boom of the sea far below came faintly. When we were ready to start down Harry, always the show-off, had to go and stand on the edge. I can still see him striking a pose with an arm outstretched, pointing to the west and declaiming like a ham actor, "There she lies, kid—three thousand miles across the glittering seas —America thè beautiful. And you can have her." He turned his head, grinning at me, as I came up behind him.

I can't remember the expression on his face when he felt my hand in his back. Somehow that seems to have faded from memory completely. But I can hear him screaming all the way to the rocks seven hundred feet below, with the gulls all wheeling and screaming too. Just like they are today.

Well, I guess I won't be coming up here any more. I'll be in Cincinnati tomorrow. It doesn't take long these days. Those jets have made a whale of a difference. And I won't be coming over again. What's there to come for now I've buried them both? Think of it—fifty-three years married and happy too.

Isn't that something?

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FINAL TICKET TO TAHOE

The kid looked at his two captives—the one who sniveled for mercy, the one who stared grimly back at him. "Tomorrow, it'll be over." He touched his gun. "Know what I mean?" he said softly. . . .

By JAMES McKIMMEY

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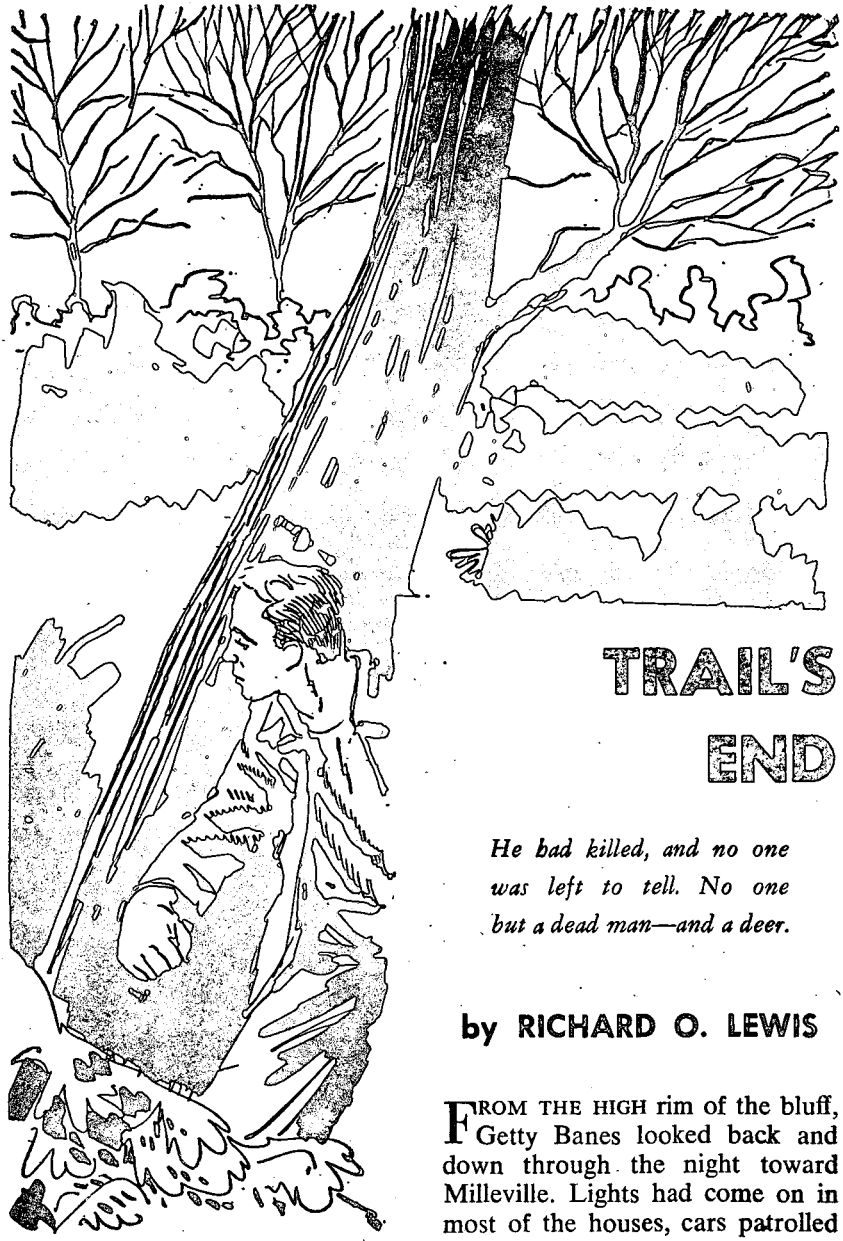

TRAIL'S END

He had killed, and no one was left to tell. No one but a dead man—and a deer.

by RICHARD O. LEWIS

FROM THE HIGH rim of the bluff, Getty Banes looked back and down through the night toward Milleville. Lights had come on in most of the houses, cars patrolled

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the streets, lights flashed on and off along the river bank, and the two roads outside of town were alive with car lights.

The hunt was on. They were searching every nook and cranny and setting up road blocks.

Getty took the gun from his pocket, stripped off the bulky coveralls, and shoved the garment beneath the bole of a fallen tree. He tucked the gun into the belt of his trousers beneath his jacket, oriented himself in the darkness, then began limping rapidly northward through the deep grass beneath the great oaks and elms.

Getty knew these woods the way he knew the palm of his hand. He had hunted deer and smaller game here scores of times during the past five years. To his right lay the rugged cliff and a two hundred-foot drop to the rocks below. To his left was a sink-hole, a deep, conical depression where water had leached a cavern into the underlying limestone. Its sides were steep, and its bottom was filled with a jumble of rocks and trees that were slowly being sucked down. Further ahead lay a transverse gully that, by the dim light of the stars, would be easier to skirt than to cross.

He guessed it was near midnight, five hours before the light of dawn would spread the skies. Time enough. He would be ten or twelve miles from Milleville by then, in an area where the woods fanned out and widened away from the cliff ridge. He would be safe there until the hunt died down. Then he could wander ever northward, drift into some small town, and find work for awhile—until he could pull a decent job.

Plodding through the darkness, half feeling his way among the tree trunks, Getty gave little enough thought to the death of old Stan back at the service station—except for the inconvenience of it all.

If old Stan hadn't jerked down the mask and recognized him, the old coot would still be alive. And if that brat of a kid hadn't glued his nose against the window at the sound of the muffled shot and then ran screaming down the street. . . .

Getty wished he could have caught that kid and throttled him. But the kid had been too quick for him and he had been left with no choice other than to take to his heels northward out of town and up the great ravine that led to the rolling hills above the bluff.

Getty grinned into the dark. No one had guessed as yet where he had gone. While they were searching and setting up road blocks, he would be putting miles between him and the town.

Dawn found Getty tired and worn. The lack of sleep, the excitement, the frequent climbs over rocks and logs and up and down the steep sides of gullies had taken their toll. He slumped down to a log, wiped the hair back out of his eyes, and lit a cigarette. His foot,

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where the rock had fallen on it during his hurried climb up the ravine, was sore and swollen. It could be broken. He was afraid to examine it lest he couldn't get his shoe back on. He needed rest now, rest and a few hours of sleep.

He got to his feet and looked quickly about for a sheltering thicket or rock crevice. And then he saw his trail, the trail he had left in the tall grass, and a wave of panic swept through him.

Mo, the Mohican! Mo would guess immediately the route he had taken, up the ravine, the shortest way to the woods from the service station. Mo, with a group of men at his back, was probably on his trail at this very moment!

The Mohican was not an Indian. He had earned the name by living like one, at least through the summer months. In season, Mo—few knew him by any other name—harvested the fruits of the field: mushrooms, wild asparagus, berries, grapes, apples, nuts, ginsing, and whatever else was available. Fall and winter, he guided parties of deer hunters, for he could follow any trail unerringly.

Getty tossed away his cigarette and glanced about. Directly north, the grassy woods stopped abruptly at a boundary fence. Second-growth trees and thickets of plum and hazel lay beyond.

He got quickly over the fence and began pushing his way through the brush.

In a moment, he knew it was no use. Behind him, were overturned leaves, crushed twigs, broken stems of the may apple. The trail here was as plain to the practiced eye as it had been in the grass. He would have to find a way—

"Hi, Getty!"

Getty jumped as if a shot had torn through him. His hand snaked to the pistol in his belt, his body tense.

Then he turned, slowly. On a stump not a dozen feet away, two plastic bags of morels on the ground beside him, sat Mo.

"Heard you comin'," Mo said, grinning a wide, toothless grin. "Makin' more noise'n a herd o' elephants!"

Sudden relief buzzed through Getty's nerves. Mo hadn't trailed him! Mo had been hunting mushrooms, had slept over night in the woods, had no knowledge of what had happened in Milleville.

He relaxed and let his hand

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slide away from the gun. No one was trailing him; only the Mohican would have given thought to such a procedure.

Mo glanced through the trees at the morning sun. "Couldn't have walked this far from town so early," he judged. "Must have brought your car."

His car! That was a laugh! The state police would have nabbed him in less than an hour!

"Parked it over in Harper's lane," he said.

"Give you half," offered Mo, picking up one of the bags, "for a lift back to town. Save you from huntin' 'em."

"Not going back right now," said Getty, a troublesome thought beginning to hammer at his head. "Came to do some walking."

Mo rubbed his jaw. The black stubble there was almost as long as the sparse, close-cropped hair of his round head.

"Must be five pound," he persisted. "Worth a dollar a pound."

"You go ahead," said Getty, starting off. "If you don't get a ride by the time I come along, I'll pick you up." Then the troublesome thought became clear, and he stopped. He couldn't let Mo get back to town! Once there, he'd hear the news. Then he'd be back. With the sheriff and a few more. And he'd pick up the trail right here! He'd have to prevent that.

"Anything happen in town last night?" Mo wanted to know.

"No," Getty said, without turning. "Nothing at all."

It would be easy. Just pull the pistol and turn. He knew of a sinkhole near at hand. He could toss the body in. The people of Milleville were used to Mo's frequent periods of absence. No one would look for him, not for a week or more. By then, the rubble at the bottom of the hole would have caved in further.

He slid the gun from his belt. Finger on trigger, he eased the hammer back as silently as possible, then swung around.

The stump was empty. Neither Mo nor the mushrooms were there. But a silent shadow was gliding away just beyond a clump of hazel.

Getty took hurried aim and fired. The shadow leaped away, hopping and jumping through the brush, overalls flapping, a bag of morels jiggling and swaying from each hand.

Getty fired again, just as Mo ducked behind another thicket. His injured foot buckled beneath him as he tried to give chase. He caught sight of Mo again, further along, and emptied the gun at him just as he toppled from sight over the rim of a gully.

Getty jammed the useless gun into his belt and cursed himself for being a fool. He should have thought quicker, killed the man instead of waiting to be caught up in his own lies. Mo knew he wasn't out for a walk. He had seen the

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painful limp. Mo knew that something unusual had happened in town; he had probably slept on the rim of the bluff and had seen the lights go on and the cars scurrying around.

Mo had seen the lines of fatigue and sleeplessness in his face, had probably caught sight of the gun. All that, plus Mo's own animal-like instincts, had caused him to take flight at the first opportunity.

Getty struck out northward again. At best, he would have but an hour or two now before they were on his trail. He would have to hurry as fast as his foot would permit, keep ahead of them—until nightfall, if possible.

He knew Mo's method of tracking, had seen him at it, tracking deer. Mo didn't look at individual tracks. That was too slow. He always looked far ahead—forty or fifty feet—and at that distance his keen eyes ever sought the broken twig, the over-turned leaves, the bent grass, the twisted bush, the telltale sign that led him rapidly on. And Mo had never yet lost a woodland trail!

As Getty shoved on, he kept alert for sight of pasture land, a grazed area where he could mingle his own tracks with those of cows or horses. That might confuse Mo. And if Mo lost the trail, the tracks of the searchers at his back would make it almost impossible for him to back-track to pick up the original trail again.

But by nightfall Getty had found no such pasture land, only the endless, wooded hills and gullies. And there were no familiar landmarks now to guide his way. He had never been this far afield before.

He bumped into a tree in the dark and leaned wearily against it to rest his foot and listen. Somewhere, a whip-poor-will was exercising its doleful voice monotonously. But that was all. Perhaps one of those last slugs from the gun had found its mark, after all, and Mo was lying in the tomb-like blackness of the gully.

Getty was about to push on when he heard it, faint and in the distance. It was the sound he had been waiting to hear and hoping he would not hear—the voice of the hunters.

He backed quickly away from the tree, away from the leafy branches, and searched upward for the North Star or the Great Dipper. Following a trail at night would be slow work, even for Mo, and all he, Getty, had to do was to keep going, keep ahead of them and hope that, somehow, Mo would fail.

Satisfied with his directions, he began feeling his way northward again, only to find himself suddenly enmeshed in a tangle of vine-covered bushes that tore painfully at his foot and sent sharp needles into his hand. He began to feel his way slowly and carefully to the right, trying to skirt them or to find

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a way through. And it was then that the bushes, directly beneath his hand, burst into noise and confusion with a frightening suddenness that sent him leaping backward—and into nothingness.

Even as Getty felt the earth no longer beneath him, he realized that he had merely startled a deer from its night's repose in the bushes. Then he hit the side of a steep incline and went rolling. His leg struck something and twisted with excruciating pain. His chin slammed down hard against a solid object, and consciousness left him in a blaze of lights.

Getty awakened nearly an hour later to the sound of voices. They were nearer now, almost upon him. He felt about him. Only rocks and loose soil. He turned over to his side, and the pain in his leg nearly robbed him of his senses again. It was twisted under him. Broken.

He looked up, saw the black circle of tree tops high above him against the stars, and knew he had tumbled down the steep side of a sink-hole. A curse welled up within him, but no sound came through his throat. He felt his jaw. It was numb, puffed to nearly twice normal size.

He heard the voices again. Nearer. And the leaves of the trees above him began to reflect the light of probing torches. He heard the crunch of boots through brush and bramble, and a bit of loose dirt trickled down upon him. He lay silent and tense, scarcely daring to breathe.

Someone cursed as a thorn tore into flesh, the lights veered away, and the sound of the boots grew slowly fainter.

The silence and darkness of night returned, and with it came sudden realization. They were leaving! Leaving him here! Trapped!

Getty tried to call out, tried to scream, tried to let them know where he was. But no sound passed through his swollen and constricted throat. He beat the earth with his fists, sobbed silently, and felt the rocks beneath him slide slowly downward while a whip-poor-will repeated its own name questioningly.

And Mo led the searchers on through the night—following the trail of a frightened deer.

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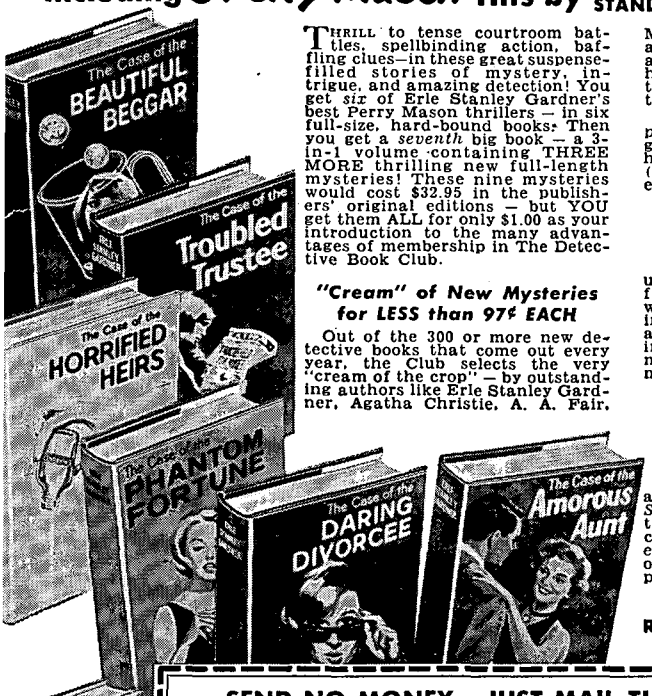
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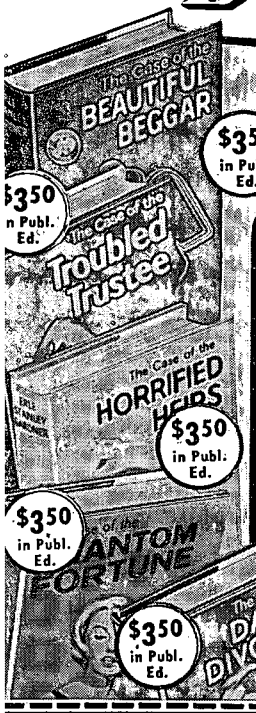
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